

HEART SUTRA

Commented by Khenpo Sodargye

2016 Edition

Form is emptiness

Emptiness is form

Form is not other than emptiness

Emptiness is not other than form

Dedicated to

Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche in deep gratitude and love

May your compassion and wisdom illuminate everywhere
and enlighten every sentient being.



PRAJNAPARAMITA DEITY



KHENPO
SODARGYE

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Heart Sutra

(Root Text)

Root Text

The Title of the Sutra

IN SANSKRIT:

Bhagavati Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra

IN ENGLISH:

The Blessed Mother, the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom

A1. The Origin of the Teaching

B1. Six Perfections

Thus have I heard, at one time, the Exalted One was residing on Vulture Peak Mountain in Rajgriha, together with an assembly of great monks and bodhisattvas, the great beings.

B2. The Background to the Occurrence

At that time, the Exalted One was absorbed in a concentration on the discernment of things called the “apprehension of the profound”.

Also, at that time, Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great being, as he engaged the profound perfection of wisdom,

clearly perceived that the five aggregates are empty of inherent existence.

A2. Main Text

B1. The Question and the Answer

C1. Bring up the Question

Then, the venerable Shariputra, by the power of the Buddha, said to the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokiteshvara, “If a son or daughter of noble qualities wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom, how should he then train?”

C2. Answer the Question

D1. A Brief Instruction on How to Practice Prajnaparamita

As these words were spoken, Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great being, replied to the venerable Shariputra, saying, “If a son or a daughter of noble qualities wishes to train in the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom, he or she should observe that the five aggregates are empty of inherent existence in this way.

D2. An Extensive Elaboration on Prajnaparamita

E1. The Natural Prajnaparamita

F1. The Emptiness of Five Aggregates

G1. The Emptiness of Form

Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness; emptiness is not other than form.

G2. The Emptiness of the Other Four Aggregates

In the same way, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are also empty.

F2. The Sevenfold Profundity

Therefore, Shariputra, all phenomena are emptiness, that is, with no characteristics, no production, no cessation, no stains, no purity, no increase, no decrease.

E2. The Path Prajnaparamita

F1. Determine the Nature of the Five Aggregates as Emptiness

Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness.

F2. Determine the Nature of the Twelve Sense Bases as Emptiness

There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind. There is no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no texture, or mental objects.

F3. Determine the Nature of the Eighteen Elements as Emptiness

There is no eye-element, up to and including no element of mental consciousness.

F4. Determine the Nature of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination as Emptiness

There is no ignorance, and there is no extinction of ignorance, up to and including no aging and death, and no extinction of aging and death.

F5. Determine the Nature of the Four Noble Truths as Emptiness

There is no suffering, no origin, no cessation, no path,

E3. The Resultant Prajnaparamita

no wisdom, no attainment, and there is also no non-attainment.

D3. The Merit of the Realization of Emptiness

Therefore, Shariputra, because they have no attainment, all bodhisattvas depend on the perfection of wisdom and abide

in it. Their mind is unobstructed, so they have no fear, and having passed beyond error, they will enter into final nirvana.

D4. The Fruit of the Realization of Emptiness

All the buddhas of the three times have awakened to supreme, perfect, and complete enlightenment by depending on the perfection of wisdom.

D5. The Mantra with Great Blessings

Therefore, one should know that the great mantra of the perfection of wisdom, the mantra of great knowledge, the supreme mantra, the mantra that is equal to the unequalled, is the mantra that pacifies all suffering, and it is true because it is not deceptive. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom was then stated:

tadyatha gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!

D6. Encourage to Learn and Practice Prajnaparamita

Shariputra, a bodhisattva, a great being, should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in this way.”

B2. Dispel Doubt through the Buddha's Affirmation

At that time, the Exalted One emerged from that concentration and said to Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great being: "Well done, well done, son of noble qualities, it is just so; it should be just so. The perfection of wisdom should be practiced just as you said. The tathagatas will also rejoice in this."

A3. Praise and Rejoice

Then, having the Buddha spoken these words, the venerable Shariputra and the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokiteshvara, with all beings of the world including gods, humans, asuras and gandharvas, heard the Buddha's discourse with great joy, received it with conviction, and promised to engage in practice.

The Commentary on *Heart Sutra*

by Khenpo Sodargye



INTRODUCTION OF THE SUTRA

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE *HEART* *SUTRA*

As we know, Buddhism has a long history of more than 2,500 years. In this long time, since the Buddha turned the Dharma Wheel and then passed into nirvana, great masters in both Tibetan and Han Buddhism have all attached great importance to the *Heart Sutra*, the shortest scripture on the perfection of wisdom.

For example, the main doctrinal traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, with the four great traditions of the Gelug, the Sakya, the Kagyu, the Nyingma, as well as the Jonang, all attach great importance to the *Prajnaparamita-Hrdaya Sutra*, commonly known as the *Heart Sutra*. The *Heart Sutra* is an indispensable scripture in any master's repertoire of teachings and practices. Most Dharma practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism adopt it in their collections of recitations and chant it regularly, either early in the morning, late in the evening, or at any other time.

In Tibetan people's daily life, such as performing ceremonies for the dead, in the rituals of consecrations, in the practice of animal liberation, and even in building a new house, the *Heart Sutra* plays an essential role. As long as one recites the *Heart Sutra*, the activity as a whole will be successfully complete, and no adverse conditions due to harmful demons will arise during the activity. The *Heart Sutra* is often recited together with a supplemental section for dokpa, the practice of averting harm and negativity.

This is also clear in Han Buddhism. Regardless of the Pure Land or the Chan tradition, or the other traditions, all monasteries and all eminent masters hold the *Heart Sutra* in the highest regard. This scripture has long been commonly practiced in many traditions in China.

Not only is it true in the regions where Mahayana flourishes, the *Heart Sutra* is also held in high regard everywhere else. The monks of the Southern traditions of Buddhism in Thailand and Sri Lanka also chant the *Heart Sutra* as their daily practice. Back to 1999, a Thai master came to visit Larung Gar, and he told Khenpo Sodargye that he carried the *Heart Sutra* in the collection of recitations with him at all times.

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

Although the *Heart Sutra* is very short, compared with the *Diamond Sutra* or other scriptures on the perfection of wisdom, why is it so important and how did it come to receive such a consideration?

After the Buddha attained enlightenment, he turned the Dharma Wheel of the teachings three times during a period of more than forty years, explaining to living beings the eighty-four thousand teachings. Among the three turnings of the Dharma Wheel, in the first the Buddha elucidated the teaching on the four noble truths of suffering, origins, cessation, and the path; in the second turning of the Dharma Wheel, the Buddha revealed the teachings on the perfection of wisdom and emptiness; and during the third turning of the Dharma Wheel, he disclosed the luminous nature of the essence of the tathagatas.

In the Buddhadharma as a whole, the most profound and most important of the three wheels of the teachings is the content of the

second wheel. But why is it the most important? Because it reveals the true aspect of all phenomena and shows the path that the living beings of the three realms must follow in order to attain liberation. And the collection of all topics included in the second wheel of the teachings is the entire set of the Prajnaparamita sutras.

When Buddha Shakyamuni was soon to enter nirvana, he passed on the eighty-four thousand teachings to Ananda. He then solemnly addressed him, declaring that, "I will not blame you if you forget entirely, or if you damage completely, the eighty-four thousand teachings, except for the perfection of wisdom. But if you misplace a single line of the perfection of wisdom, I will hold you personally responsible for it." This passage illustrates how, setting apart the perfection of wisdom, the eighty-four thousand teachings as a whole are not as important in content as a single verse on the perfection of wisdom.

The Prajnaparamita sutras are of three types, including the long, middle, and short discourses on the perfection of wisdom. The long Prajnaparamita sutra has one hundred thousand lines. The Tibetan edition of the large Prajnaparamita sutra makes twelve heavy cases. The middle Prajnaparamita sutra has twenty-five thousand lines; and the short Prajnaparamita sutra has eight thousand lines.

If we condense the essential meaning of the Prajnaparamita sutras, we obtain the *Heart Sutra*. So it is the essence, the heart, and the core of the Buddhadharma. Put another way, the contents of the *Heart Sutra* actually cover all the eighty-four thousand teachings. It is the scripture whose text is the shortest and yet whose doctrinal principles are the deepest and subtlest. Indeed, it can be described as “a mustard seed containing Mount Meru”. Just like modern technology enabling the compression of a large amount of information into a tiny compact disc, the extremely concise *Heart Sutra* condenses the essence of all Buddhadharma. That’s why generations of scholars have held the *Heart Sutra* in such an extraordinary consideration. It is the essence of the entire Buddhadharma.

Our lifespan and energy are limited. Therefore, even if we wish to study the eighty-four thousand teachings as a whole, we will find it impossible to know the entire Buddhadharma thoroughly and with no obstructions. However, if we could grasp the main points, we could then effectively bring out the essentials. From this perspective, to study the *Heart Sutra* is the wisest choice.

WHO ARE ABLE TO STUDY THE *HEART SUTRA*?

Certainly, to be able to meet this sublime teaching as a follower of the Buddha is the result of the extensive accumulation of merit in the past numerous eons. As it is said in Buddhist scriptures, anyone who meets the Buddhadharma of the Mahayana must have formed a subtle connection with the Buddha's teaching in previous lives. Lacking such a supreme connection, it will be utterly impossible to hear a single word, or a line, of the teachings on the perfection of wisdom even in dreams, let alone to reflect about them, or even further, to engage in their practice. Therefore, we should develop a mind of incomparable joy and care for this scripture.

In Longchenpa's *Treasury of Instructions*, he stated, "Believing in and hearing the Buddhadharma, feeling joy and performing eulogies, as well as even slightly engaging in the correct teaching, sow the seeds of liberation leading away from cyclic existence." Anytime one believes in and listens to Buddhist scriptures, rejoicing and

praising them, one accumulates immeasurable merits. Therefore, whether or not you are Buddhist, if you chant the *Heart Sutra* you will develop an auspicious connection with the teachings on emptiness.

In Buddhist scriptures it is also said that anyone who learns about emptiness must be someone who has great merit and wisdom. Anyone who wishes to know whether one has a connection with the teachings of emptiness, and whether the seed of emptiness has already ripened in one's mental continuum, can draw a conclusion based on the feeling one has after hearing about it: if, having heard the *Heart Sutra*, one has goose bumps, is moved to tears, and is unable to control the joy in one's heart, this proves that one has had a connection with the teachings on emptiness in previous lives; if not so, one was far removed from the teachings on emptiness.

There's a famous story of Lord Atisha. Once two monks training in the Southern traditions of Buddhism came to Atisha on account of his reputation in order to request the transmission of the teachings from him. To begin, Atisha taught them the teaching of the four noble truths and the view of selflessness of persons. In hearing the teachings, the two monks were so happy that their face covered in smiles, and repeatedly nodded their head in agreement. Atisha then taught them the selflessness of phenomena and the contents of the *Heart Sutra*. Who would have imagined that, after hearing

these teachings, they became terrified, and promptly begged Atisha to stop, saying: “Great sage! Great master! Please stop teaching us, you’re frightening us!” Later on, despite further requests, Atisha ignored them. Eventually, the two monks had no choice but to cover their ears and leave.

Deeply moved, Atisha then said: “Merely receiving and keeping the pure vows of the basic vehicle bears no great significance, for one should listen extensively and expand one’s learning. In particular, one should understand the Prajnaparamita sutras. If not so, in no way will one understand the Buddha’s perfect wisdom.”

In general, as one becomes familiar with the Buddha’s teaching, it is rather easy to accept the teachings of the vehicles of humans and gods such as “virtue has a pleasant reward, non-virtue has a non-pleasant reward”. In studying the profound teachings on emptiness in such scriptures as the *Heart Sutra*, it is necessary to have a sense of one’s capacity. The same principles that apply to the Great Perfection also apply to the teachings on emptiness of the perfection of wisdom. If you are unable to accept them, not only will they be of any benefit, but they could also harm you. Everyone must treat this issue with caution, and with conscientious introspection, to ensure that one is a suitable vessel to listen and practice the teachings on emptiness. But, as Khenpo Sodargye said, everyone in the audience must already have a connection with the

teachings on emptiness. If not so, one would not be able to hear about the *Heart Sutra* at all.

HOW TO STUDY THE *HEART SUTRA*?

The *Heart Sutra* touches upon many ideas concerning the conventional aspect of phenomena and the ultimate aspect of reality. If one genuinely wishes to understand these ideas, not only must one become proficient in the meanings implied in the long, middle, and short scriptures on the perfection of wisdom, there are still two texts that one must study: the one is the *Abhidharmakosa* (*A Treasury of Abhidharma*) and the other is the *Root Verses on the Middle Way*. With no prior study of these two works, we will be unable to grasp the contents of the perfection of wisdom, for many of its ideas cannot be explained clearly in only a few words.

In the *Abhidharmakosa* we can learn about such concepts as the five aggregates, the twelve sense bases, the eighteen constituents, the twelve links of dependent origination, and the four noble truths; but still, we will not ascertain the emptiness of these notions. After Buddha Shakyamuni passed into final nirvana, Nagarjuna was the great scholar who, as prophesied by the Buddha himself in quite a

few scriptures, gathered and elucidated the Prajnaparamita sutras. The most important of Nagarjuna's works is the *Root Verses on the Middle Way*.

Moreover, the works that comment and explain this text and its underlying intention are the works by Nagarjuna's direct disciple—Acharya Aryadeva's *Four Hundred Stanzas*, together with Acharya Chandrakirti's *Prasannapada (Clear Words)* and *Madhyamakavatara (Entrance into the Middle Way)*. Through the study of such Madhyamika works, we will be able to understand that all of the aforementioned concepts are empty. Once we have laid this foundation, learning the contents of the *Heart Sutra* will become an easy and smooth task.

However, because of the limitations imposed by our teaching schedule, we're unable to follow a thorough commentary on the profound and vast meanings of the *Heart Sutra*. Here we will only touch on the main points, commenting on the exterior meanings in a simple and cursory way: while certain neophytes will sow the seed of wisdom, everyone will be able to understand the main topics covered therein.

ABOUT THE DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE *HEART SUTRA*

There are different versions of the *Heart Sutra*. Despite minor variations concerning the name of each translation, and despite slight differences in the texts, the main points remain fundamentally the same. The focus of the debate on the difference concerns only the opening and the closing portions of the translations. The translation by Xuanzang lack these two portions, which are included in other translations. Some believe that the translation by Xuanzang are inconsistent. So they discredit this shorter version, and believe that it is not coherent. Still others believe on the contrary that the textual editions lacking coherence are the longer versions with the opening and closing portions.

Indeed, we should trust both shorter version and longer versions, for the two types are not mutually exclusive, and we need not chose one and reject the other. Based on reliable historical records, the most popular and most authoritative *Heart Sutra* in the Tibetan

language was translated directly into Tibetan from Sanskrit. Its translator Vimalamitra is an extraordinary translator, also one of the great lineage masters of the Great Perfection in the Nyingma tradition.

There could be three reasons that Xuanzang's translation differs from other translations. First, it might be due to differences in the original Sanskrit texts. Second, it is possible that the teaching spoken by the Buddha is somewhat different when heard by different living beings. For example, when the Buddha set forth the wheel of the teaching at Vulture Peak, about one hundred thousand of his disciples were present. While each disciple possessed the Dharani of not forgetting, nonetheless each perceived a teaching that was not exactly the same. The Buddha proclaims different teachings because he can address the different interests and predispositions of living beings.

The third reason is that the Sanskrit version originally employed by Xuanzang should have been given to him directly by Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. It is mentioned in the story of Xuanzang retrieving Buddhist scriptures in India.

At the very beginning, when Xuanzang left for India to study the Buddhadharma, he had a large following. Later, however, he remained alone. When he approached the great desert, having

overturned his water flask, he lost direction, so that he and his horse were unable to proceed as they fainted from thirst. For four nights and five days in a row, Xuanzang did not ingest a single drop of water. He simply dropped dead on the desert, and chanted the name of Avalokiteshvara, until, the fifth night, the old horse perceived the smell of water plants in the gusting breeze. Only then was Xuanzang able to find his way out of this difficult situation.

Once he passed by a monastery. At that very moment, he happened to hear someone cry out loud. As he came closer to take a look, he found out that the person who cried was a monk whose entire body was covered in blisters (just like leprosy today). Xuanzang was fully aware of the length of his journey, still, as he saw this destitute monk, he did not hasten on with his journey. Instead, he remained in the monastery to cure him. Later, only when the monk fully recovered from illness, did Xuanzang bid farewell and proceed further. As Xuanzang was about to leave, in order to express his gratitude, the monk gave him a Sanskrit scripture as a gift. That very scripture was the celebrated *Heart Sutra*.

On the road, Xuanzang would always read this sutra, especially when he met with adverse conditions and obstacles. As long as he recited the sutra, any adverse condition or obstacle would immediately and completely fade away.

The amazing thing is that along the route of his return from India, Xuanzang arranged things so that he could repay the kindness of the monk who had given him the *Heart Sutra*. Who would have thought that, as he reached the place where the monastery was then located, not only the monk but also the monastery had vanished without a trace.

It is said that the elderly monk was Avalokiteshvara, who then manifested as a monk in order to personally give Xuanzang the Sanskrit manuscript of the *Heart Sutra*. This statement stands to reason, for Avalokiteshvara's power is inconceivable. In addition, the *Heart Sutra* takes shape through a dialogue empowered by Buddha Shakyamuni between Shariputra and Avalokiteshvara. Moreover, in the sutra itself all topics are entirely proclaimed by Avalokiteshvara. There is also a chance that Avalokiteshvara manifested as a monk in order to give Xuanzang the Sanskrit version of the *Heart Sutra*.

Therefore, the *Heart Sutra* translated by Xuanzang is the most powerful. If one wishes to chant it, one can do so relying entirely upon Xuanzang's translation. But in providing a commentary to others, or when we want to thoroughly understand the meaning of the *Heart Sutra*, it is also admissible to have the version with the opening and closing portions added.

THE SUBLIME BLESSINGS OF THE *HEART SUTRA*

In Tibetan Buddhism, there is such a tradition that if certain adverse conditions come up, people will chant the *Heart Sutra* to get rid of them. For those senior monastics or elder practitioners, when meeting with greatly difficult situations, such as earthquakes or severe disasters, they will chant the *Heart Sutra*. In particular, on the 29th day of the twelfth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar, everyone will chant the *Heart Sutra*'s dokpa liturgy of averting harm and negativity, with the auspices to avoid all hindrances from evil spirits during the coming year by relying on the power of emptiness from the *Heart Sutra*.

If we habitually carry the *Heart Sutra* with us, and if we perform offerings to it at our shrining room, due to the power and blessing of emptiness from the Prajnaparamita, we will be able to get rid of all negative conditions. Or even if we place it by our pillow when we sleep, we won't have nightmares.

Some may wonder, what is the power of blessing? Simply put, what we call the power of blessing is certain kind of power that has obviously beneficial effects to us, yet cannot be seen with our naked eye, for it is immaterial.

There are many things that cannot be seen with the naked eye while having practical benefits. For example, medicine has the power to cure, electricity has the power to charge, and, in a similar way, anything has a kind of force and power. The blessings of the *Heart Sutra* come from the power of emptiness, the power of the Buddha, the power of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, as well as the power of ultimate truth, and, in addition, the power of the confidence that we have in the *Heart Sutra*. Especially when we have such confidence, together with all the other conditions gathering together, we can certainly be blessed by the incredible power and get rid of all kinds of harm caused by evil spirits and others. The power of the blessings is indeed inconceivable.

In those sutras talking about the merits of emptiness, it is often said that if one carries with oneself a scripture that teaches emptiness, such as the *Heart Sutra*, any living being who touches the scripture directly or indirectly, for example, being touched by the wind that brushes against the scripture, will not fall into the three lower realms; likewise, if these sources of the teachings are carried with a person, then any other being who touches or drinks this person's

bathing water will not fall into the three lower realms; and anyone who chants the *Heart Sutra*, those beings who hear his or her voice, even when quarrelling with others, will also not fall into the three lower realms. Certainly, this is not to say that such beings will be able to immediately attain liberation; nevertheless, the blessings from the scriptures on emptiness are inconceivable and have great power to protect those beings from being suffered in the lower realms.

Since we know that the merits of the teachings on emptiness are quite inconceivable, we should have confidence in this. If we meet with adverse conditions, hardship or any form of suffering during our practice, as Khenpo Sodargye suggested, we should try to abide on the meaning of emptiness and then chant the *Heart Sutra*, in this way we can overcome any kind of obscurations.



OPENING

THE TITLE OF THE SUTRA

The Title of the Sutra

IN SANSKRIT:

Bhagavati Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra

IN ENGLISH:

The Blessed Mother, the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom

The full title of the *Heart Sutra* is *Bhagavati Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra*, which means *The Blessed Mother, the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom*. Here *Bhagavati, the Blessed Mother*, is the appositive of *Prajna Paramita*, or in other words, *Prajna Paramita* is described as *Bhagavati, the Blessed Mother*.

The literal meaning of *Prajnaparamita* is “wisdom gone to the other shore”. But the term *prajna* resists the translation as “wisdom.” In Han Buddhism, it was not translated directly as wisdom, but simply maintained its transliteration as “bo re”, because the term

wisdom only partially explains the meaning of *prajna*, and does not express the profound implications of the term entirely. Similarly, in Tibetan Buddhism, according to King Trisong Detsen's request, all the titles of the Prajnaparamita sutras were left in Sanskrit.

The Meaning of *Bhagavati*

Bhagavati is the one who has achieved enlightenment, or buddhahood. This term refers not to a physically existing person, but rather to the absolute state of Prajnaparamita itself. The term *Bhagavati* has the connotation of "mother", or it is considered as feminine because, through realization of her own nature, Prajnaparamita, she gives birth to the buddhas of the three times, and thus is the mother of the so-called "Four Noble Children": shravakas, pratyekabuddhas, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. Or to put it in a simple way, Prajnaparamita is considered as the mother of all noble beings.

Buddha Shakyamuni, teaching elsewhere in the Prajnaparamita, says that "those people who would become shravakas must learn to practice the Prajnaparamita; those who aspire to be a pratyekabuddha must learn and practice the Prajnaparamita; those who would achieve bodhisattva realization must learn and practice the Prajnaparamita; and those who would accomplish buddhahood must learn and practice the Prajnaparamita."

The Meaning of *Prajna Paramita*

Prajna means supreme wisdom. In Sanskrit *pra* means supreme or highest, and *jna* means knowledge or wisdom. It is supreme wisdom because what it knows or understands is the meaning of our true, absolute nature, and there is no meaning or knowledge higher than this.

Paramita means beyond, or gone to the other shore. It also can be translated as perfection in some contexts. So what is the other shore? From a worldly perspective, when someone has completed the goal of one's task, one can be said to have reached the other shore. In this context, "the other shore" indicates nirvana, whereas "this shore" indicates samsara. Living beings are drowning in the ocean of the three realms of cyclic existence, ever unable to emerge. Therefore, they are on this shore of the ocean of suffering. But the liberation of nirvana is beyond the ocean of cyclic existence. Hence, it is called the other shore. Only the Buddha has crossed to the other shore, and no one else in the world has gone to the other shore. All the living beings of the three realms are wandering in the ocean of suffering that is cyclic existence, still relatively distant from the other shore.

Regardless of an expertise, a globally renowned scientist, or a philosopher, or a thinker reputed for profound erudition, one can

only be proficient in the knowledge of a certain worldly field. There is still a great difference between the wisdom of the Buddha, who is omniscient, and the knowledge of such individuals. And even with the wisdom of an arhat, they will not have reached the other shore, since they have only realized the selflessness of persons, but not have destroyed the rest part of emotional obscurations and cognitive obscurations, which are caused by the grasping at a personal ego (self of the individual) and the grasping at phenomena as truly existent (self of phenomena) respectively. So the other shore is the shore beyond all extremes where supreme and perfect wisdom will awaken us.

1 The Classification of *Prajnaparamita*

It is well known that Prajnaparamita, the perfection of wisdom, divides into four kinds: (1) the textual perfection of wisdom, namely the textual Prajnaparamita, such as the long, the middle, and the short Prajnaparamita sutras; (2) the foundational Prajnaparamita, or the natural Prajnaparamita, which is emptiness, the foundation of all things; (3) the path Prajnaparamita, that is, the five paths, the path of accumulation, the path of joining, the path of seeing, the path of meditation, and the path of no-more-learning; and (4) the resultant Prajnaparamita, the wisdom of the Buddha.

The four types of Prajnaparamita can also divide into expressing wisdom Prajnaparamita and expressed Prajnaparamita. The expressed Prajnaparamita is of three kinds, namely foundational or natural Prajnaparamita, path Prajnaparamita, and resultant Prajnaparamita. The entity of all phenomena that is beyond conceptual elaboration is foundational Prajnaparamita. The Buddha perfectly understands the truth of all phenomena that is beyond conceptual elaboration, and this wisdom is resultant Prajnaparamita. How does the Buddha realize the truth and achieve this wisdom? It is by relying on the path Prajnaparamita, which is the wisdom of the five paths.

What, then, is the expressing Prajnaparamita? It is the textual Prajnaparamita that superbly teaches the meaning of the perfection of wisdom. The textual Prajnaparamita can also divide into (1) the textual Prajnaparamita of the sutras and (2) the textual Prajnaparamita of the commentaries or shastras. The textual Prajnaparamita of the sutras is the entire set of the Prajnaparamita sutras. The textual Prajnaparamita of the commentaries includes treatises such as the *Entrance into the Middle Way* and the *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*. The *Heart Sutra* belongs to the category of the textual Prajnaparamita of the sutras.

2 The Classification of Wisdom

Indeed, the mere term “wisdom” also has different meanings, including worldly wisdom, transcendental wisdom and unsurpassable wisdom.

Worldly wisdom means any kind of ability of mastering a worldly technique, a project, or a discipline. As worldly people put it, it is to be clever and quick-witted and endowed with a profound erudition. In evaluating things by worldly standards, we can say that worldly sages such as literati, scientists, and physicists possess certain wisdom. However, from a transcendental perspective, that is, from the perspective of transcendental wisdom, they cannot be regarded as sages, since worldly wisdom is not ultimate. Worldly people have four distortions: (1) seeing what is impermanent as permanent; (2) seeing what is suffering as happiness; (3) seeing what lacks a self as having a self; (4) seeing what is impure as pure.

Transcendental wisdom indicates the wisdom of the enlightened beings such as hearers and bodhisattvas, those who understand the four Dharma seals: (1) all that is conditioned is impermanent; (2) anything in cyclic existence is suffering; (3) all phenomena are empty and devoid of self; and (4) nirvana is peace.

Unsurpassable wisdom is the wisdom of the Buddha. Because the Buddha has perfectly realized the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena, he has perfectly understood the reality of all things. The perfection of wisdom in the *Heart Sutra* indicates this unsurpassable wisdom, so it is called Prajnaparamita.

The Meaning of *Hridaya*

Hridaya means the heart, in this case signifying essence or core. The quintessence of the Buddha's teaching in its entirety is condensed in the *Heart Sutra*. According to historical records, in more than forty years during which Buddha Shakyamuni turned the wheel of the teaching, he taught the emptiness of the prajnaparamita for about twenty-two years. The *Heart Sutra* contains the quintessence of the teachings that the Buddha dispensed in those twenty-two years. This sutra lies at the heart of all these teachings. Therefore, among the vast corpus of the prajnaparamita sutras, this text is the pith, a concise presentation of the teachings elaborated upon in the rest of the prajnaparamita sutras.

Hridaya also refers to the distilled, essential message of this teaching itself, called the view. It is the view of the perfection of wisdom, pretty simple and direct, and recognizing the pure essence of emptiness.

The Meaning of *Sutra*

The Sanskrit term *sutra* literally means a chain, a thread, or a continuum. Here it means something that was heard from someone else and usually connotes a discourse. In Buddhism, it has many classifications. For example, one classification refers to the scriptures authorized by the Buddha, another to the scriptures empowered by the Buddha, yet another to the scriptures spoken by the Buddha in person, and so on. The main contents of the *Heart Sutra* are classified under the scriptures empowered by the Buddha, for the Buddha, while absorbed in the concentration called the apprehension of the profound, spoke this sutra by empowering Avalokiteshvara.

Setting aside the instructions taught personally by the Buddha, the instructions spoken by certain special figures can also be called sutra. For example, although the *Platform Sutra*, highly esteemed in the Chan tradition, is not a scripture spoken by the Buddha, its contents differ in no respect from those of a genuine scripture, thereby later generations also called it sutra. However, according to rule in Tibetan Buddhism, only the contents personally spoken, empowered, or authorized by the Buddha can be called sutra.

The foregoing explains the title of the *Heart Sutra*. As practitioners, we'd better study this scripture carefully and thoroughly, chanting

it and memorizing it in our daily practice. In this way, we will be able to destroy any adverse condition or obstacle that arises in our practice. In terms of its otherworldly qualities, the significance and the merit of the recitation of the *Heart Sutra* are quite remarkable because it gathers the essentials of emptiness into a single core.

Certainly, we must not expect to attain enlightenment all at once, and to achieve perfect understanding in one or two days of reflection. Still, if we engage listening, reflection, and meditation in a consistent way, ignorance and afflictions will get weaker and weaker in our mental continuum, while at the same time wisdom will get stronger and stronger. For the time being, we will be unable to soar freely in the vast space of the true reality of emptiness, yet in terms of view we should be able to eliminate all kinds of doubts and mistakes through leaning and reflecting, and set up a brand new and correct view. It is evident how education in Buddhism is a form of education to wisdom. Certain types of reasoning might be difficult to accept at the very beginning. Yet only through systematic reflection and discussion can we thoroughly eliminate doubt and eventually bring wisdom to perfection.

SIX PERFECTION

A1. The Origin of the Teaching

B1. Six Perfections

Thus have I heard, at one time, the Exalted One was residing on Vulture Mountain in Rajgriha, together with an assembly of great monks and bodhisattvas, the great beings.

Thus have I heard, [...]

This statement “**Thus have I heard**” is the opening of all Buddhist sutras. Prior to entering final nirvana, as he replied to Ananda’s questions, Buddha Shakyamuni established this custom: when the Buddha’s instructions are compiled into textual form as scriptures it is necessary to add this statement. The goal is to warn the compiler that it is necessary to record the scriptures from an objective standpoint, without making changes according to one’s own ideas and through one’s own initiative. With this statement,

it is helpful for later generations to develop sincere faith towards the Buddhist sutras.

The term “**thus**” expresses the perfection of the teaching. At the setting of the teaching, Buddha Shakyamuni empowered Avalokiteshvara to speak the main contents of the *Heart Sutra*, and so all the contents expressed in the sutra are entirely the Buddha’s word. “**Thus**”, I have recorded the scripture truthfully, coherently and unmistakably, just as the Buddha has spoken, without adding or removing anything.

The word “**I**” refers to the compiler, the bodhisattva Vajrapani. As is well known, Buddha Shakyamuni turned the second Dharma Wheel at Vulture Peak, later compiled into scriptures by ten thousand bodhisattvas including Manjushri and Maitreya. Among these bodhisattvas, Vajrapani was the main compiler of the Prajnaparamita sutras. It is just like the written summary of a worldly meeting, with the following statement: “Such and such is what I have heard during the meeting.” Hence, “**Thus have I heard**” are the words spoken by the compiler, the bodhisattva Vajrapani.

The term “**heard**” can be interpreted in two ways. Certain commentators believe it means that one has merely heard but not understood, for the meaning of emptiness taught by the Buddha is hard to grasp. For this reason, Vajrapani would have meant: “I have

merely heard the Buddha's teaching simply on a literal level, but I have not yet understood the subject matter." However, Taranata of the Jonang tradition regarded this interpretation to be untenable. It is not certain that, at the time of hearing, Vajrapani would have completely lacked any understanding of the subject matter. It is also a possibility that he had a partial understanding.

[...] at one time, the Exalted One was residing on Vulture Mountain in Rajgriha, [...]

"**At one time**" means during one time. But why, here, is not a specific time mentioned? Because the Buddha's miraculous transformations are countless. In front of different living beings, at times the Buddha manifests to teach as if it were summer, while at other times he manifests to teach as if it were winter. This is also the reason that there are so many different interpretations in different historical records concerning the time of the Buddha's passing into final nirvana.

If the Buddha were a common being, then it could have been said, "During a certain year, in a certain month, and in a certain day, and at this hour and minute and second, while staying at a certain teaching hall, he began to give a certain teaching." Hence it would have been possible to express a specific time with a degree of

certainty. But here, from a wider perspective, the meaning is: “At one time, when causes and conditions were ripe.”

“**The Exalted One**” is *Bhagavat* in Sanskrit. The meaning is “Endowed with Transcendence, Ownership, and Destruction”. Transcendence means “reaching beyond the extremes of samsara and nirvana”. Ownership means “possessing the merits of the six paramitas”. Destruction means “eliminating the four types of mara”, that is, defeating the mara of the aggregates, the mara of afflictions, the mara of death, and the deity Mara. Only the Buddha is perfectly endowed with the qualities of “Transcendence, Ownership, and Destruction”.

“**was residing on Vulture Mountain in Rajgriha**”: The Buddha was staying on Vulture Mountain nearby the city of Rajgriha.

Rajgriha, the capital of the ancient state of Magadha, was one of the great cities in India back to that time. There are about eighteen kilometers between Rajgriha and the Nalanda monastic university. The Buddha stayed in Rajgriha for rather long periods. And during these periods, Ananda, Mahakasyapa, and Mahamaudgalyayana, took refuge in the Buddha right there in Rajgriha.

Vulture Mountain is one of the main sites where the Buddha turned the second wheel of the teaching. As he once approached Vulture Mountain, Tsangyang Gyatso, the renowned Sixth Dalai Lama,

then perceived the Prajnaparamita sutras all over the mountain, and so he dared not climb on top. In 1990, when His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche approached Vulture Mountain, he said, “Back then, Tsangyang Gyatso dared not climb the mountain, but this time we must go.” So the people then followed His Holiness to climb the mountain. As they reached the top, they paid homage to the platform where the Buddha turned the Wheel of the Dharma, to the caves of Mahakasyapa and Mahamaudgalyayana, as well as to the other holy sites at the very top.

[...] together with an assembly of great monks and bodhisattvas, the great beings.

At that time, the retinue of followers who received the teachings was made of “an assembly of great monks” for the common vehicle, and of “bodhisattvas, the great beings” for the Mahayana.

According to some commentators, the expression “**great monks**” does not refer to common monks, but to those monks who have attained the resultant state of arhat; and the expression “**bodhisattvas, the great beings**” refers here to the bodhisattvas who have realized the ultimate truth. Common bodhisattvas—the bodhisattvas who have merely generated the conventional aspiration to awakening, as well as certain monks who have received the

common monastic vows, are not the actual retinue to whom the Buddha is imparting the teaching here.

For the term of **bodhisattva**, **bodhi** means “enlightened, awakened”, freed from the obscurations of dualistic and conceptual thinking. **Sattva** means “courageous being”. The enlightened beings, the bodhisattvas, must be courageous because they no longer exist merely for themselves and their family and friends. They dedicate the entire activities of this body, speech and mind to bringing joy and happiness to all sentient beings as limitless in number as space itself.

Arhat is a Sanskrit word meaning “one who subdues or destroys enemies”. This does not refer to an external, physically existent enemy, but rather is a metaphor referring to the inner enemies of ego-clinging, the emotions, and their concomitant obscurations. An arhat has completely uprooted these enemies.

“**Together with**” means to be complete together. The aim of this multitude of monks and bodhisattvas altogether is to meet the Buddha, attain enlightenment, and benefit living beings.

Thus, the foregoing text included in the prologue conveys the six kinds of perfections: “**Thus**” is the perfection of the teaching; “**I have heard**” is the perfection of the compiler; “**at one time**” is the perfection of time; “**the Exalted One**” is the perfection of the

root teacher; **“was residing on Vulture Mountain in Rajgriha”** is the perfection of the setting; **“together with an assembly of great monks and bodhisattvas, the great beings”** is the perfection of retinue.

In general, most scriptures include these six types of perfections. It is just like the written summary of a worldly meeting, where certain key elements such as the time, the location, the host, the participating members, the rapporteur, and the meeting outline, are all indicated.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE OCCURRENCE

B2. The Background to the Occurrence

At that time, the Exalted One was absorbed in a concentration on the discernment of things called the “apprehension of the profound”.

Also, at that time, Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great being, as he engaged the profound perfection of wisdom, clearly perceived that the five aggregates are empty of inherent existence.

When all conditions including the time, the root teacher, the retinue, and the teaching, were present, the Exalted One entered into a deep concentration, that is, he entered into a meditative absorption called the “**apprehension of the profound**”.

Why is it called **profound**? Because ordinary arhats, common beings, and non-Buddhists, are fundamentally unable to apprehend the reality of all things, which is beyond all conceptual elaborations. This realm of reality is unfathomable, and so it is called **profound**.

Apprehension: This profound realm is perceived clearly and completely by the Buddha's individual apprehension, therefore this type of absorption is said to be profound and luminous.

The expression **discernment of things** refers to many different kinds of elements, such as the five aggregates, the twelve sense bases, and the eighteen constituents, which, on the ultimate level, are beyond all conceptual elaborations, while manifest like dreams and illusions on the relative level.

We should understand that the state of a buddha has no distinctions between absorbing into or emerging from a concentration. Here, by saying that the Buddha absorbed into a concentration, it means that in front of the ordinary beings, the Buddha's material body seemed to absorb into, and emerge from concentration.

Also, at that time [...]

As the entire retinue was on site, the Buddha had already absorbed into the profound concentration.

Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great being, [...]

These three terms refer to the great bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. In Chandrakirti's *Entrance into the Middle Way*, the term **bodhisattva** is explained as follows: only the beings who have attained the first bodhisattva level and above can be called bodhisattvas. The term **great being**, *mahasattva* in Sanskrit, refers to the great bodhisattvas. In general, only the bodhisattvas who abide on the three pure levels (that is, the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth bodhisattva level) can be called great bodhisattvas. But why are they called "great"? It is because the bodhisattvas who abide on these three levels possess extensive compassion, wisdom, and power, and they can engage the vast teachings of the Mahayana, since they are able to conquer all kinds of demons.

[...] as he engaged the profound perfection of wisdom, [...]

This statement illustrates how, amid the entire retinue, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara practiced the perfection of wisdom. The term **engage** has several meanings. Generally speaking, activities such as reading or listening to the perfection of wisdom are all forms of engaging the perfection of wisdom. Here it means that when the Buddha entered into the deep concentration, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara also absorbed into his meditation on the perfection of wisdom, inspired by the power of the Buddha.

[...] clearly perceived that the five aggregates are empty of inherent existence.

At this time, Avalokiteshvara clearly perceived that the five aggregates are entirely empty of inherent existence. All compounded things or phenomena are encapsulated among the five aggregates. The term “**five aggregates**” means the gathering together of form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, which conceals the true nature of things. The first of the five aggregates is the aggregate of forms, followed in turn by the aggregate of feelings, the aggregate of perceptions, the aggregate of mental formations, and the aggregate of consciousness.

The meaning of this statement is that the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara saw with the utmost clarity that all compounded things are empty of inherent existence. The expression “**clearly perceive**” has different meanings:

For ordinary beings, clear perception is to observe through the modes of generally characterized and of self-characterized objects. For example, we can engage observation of the statement “the five aggregates are empty” by means of analytical reasoning. Thus, it is by means of conceptual discrimination that we come to observe with clarity that the five aggregates are empty of inherent existence.

For hearers and solitary buddhas, clear perception is the understanding that the five aggregates are the principal and secondary causes of suffering, and that the five aggregates are both suffering and its origin. Hence, by means of the reasoning concerning the selflessness of a person, they clearly perceive that the five aggregates are empty of inherent existence.

For buddhas and bodhisattvas, clear perception is the consummate perception of the five aggregates as empty of inherent existence through the mode of both the selflessness of a thing and the selflessness of a person. Hence, the degree to which they perceive the emptiness of the five aggregates is the most perfected.

The phrase **beyond all suffering** is lacking in the Tibetan translation, while several Chinese translations including Xuanzang's translation have this statement. So it's better for us to know this and have a brief explanation of it. The literal meaning of this statement is "transcending, surpassing all suffering". According to the *Abhidharmakosa*, suffering divides into three types: (1) suffering upon suffering, (2) suffering of change, and (3) all-pervasive suffering of conditioning. By absorbing into the meditation on the perfection of wisdom, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara transcends all kinds of suffering. This is exactly the power of Prajnaparamita.

Summary: The Buddha's Silence and the Main Figures

Thus, in the foregoing we have explained the opening portion of this sutra, namely the causes and conditions by which the *Heart Sutra* came about. Here, the most important of these is the Buddha's absorption into meditation. If the Buddha had not absorbed into meditation, Avalokiteshvara would have been unable to absorb into his meditation on wisdom, and Shariputra would have also been unable to ask his question. According to several great commentaries of ancient India, the main conditions that brought about the *Heart Sutra* were: (1) the power of the Buddha's meditative absorption; and (2) the fact that Avalokiteshvara engaged the prajnaparamita through the Buddha's empowerment, and that, as a result, he clearly perceived that the five aggregates are empty.

Generally speaking, there are said to be three principal kinds of scriptures attributed to the Buddha: those words that are actually spoken by the Buddha himself, those words spoken by a bodhisattva or a disciple on behalf of the Buddha, and those words spoken by disciples or bodhisattvas that were directly inspired by the Buddha. While this preliminary section of the *Heart Sutra* pertaining to the context of the origin of its teaching belongs to the second category, the main body of the text belongs to the third category.

Some might then ask, why Avalokiteshvara is the main figure in the Buddha's retinue? According to some commentators, Avalokiteshvara was at that time the main person in charge of the assembly, thereby Shariputra addressed his question to him.

According to another interpretation, because the subject matter of this scripture is compassion and emptiness, by means of his miraculous powers the Buddha clearly perceived that, if spoken by Avalokiteshvara, the teaching would have brought benefit to endless living beings. Therefore, the Buddha would have intentionally empowered Avalokiteshvara to engage the perfection of wisdom, and to clearly perceive that the five aggregates are emptiness. Likewise, having received the Buddha's empowerment, Shariputra would have thus intentionally raised the question to Avalokiteshvara.

From this, we see that there are three main figures in the *Heart Sutra*, and that the Buddha is the most important of them. In the whole interaction, ultimately the Buddha says only one sentence, and all the other contents, including the foundation, path, and resulting state as a whole, are entirely taught in Shariputra's question and in Avalokiteshvara's answer. Regardless, it is the Buddha who asks all questions as he empowers Shariputra, and who speaks all teachings while absorbed in meditation as he empowers Avalokiteshvara.



MAIN TEXT

THE QUESTION

A2. Main Text

B1. The Question and the Answer

C1. Bring up the Question

Then, the venerable Shariputra, by the power of the Buddha, said to the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokiteshvara, “If a son or daughter of noble qualities wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom, how should he then train?”

When the Buddha absorbed into meditation, Shariputra was there on the setting of the teaching. By the force of the Buddha’s mighty miraculous powers, Shariputra then stood up, joined the palms of his hands, and respectfully addressed the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, saying, “If a son of noble qualities wishes to practice the profound perfection of wisdom, how should he then practice it?”

Then: In that very moment. Right then, the entire retinue was at the setting of the teachings and the Buddha absorbed into his profound samadhi. It is the very moment when, empowered by the Buddha, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara also practiced the perfection of wisdom, and clearly perceived that the five aggregates are empty.

If Avalokiteshvara had not clearly perceived that the five aggregates are empty, he would have had no reason to explain to Shariputra what he then saw. Therefore, we should be aware of the importance of our own practice or realization of the Dharma teachings. Based on listening and reflecting, we have to take the final step of practicing, and only through practicing and meditating by ourselves, can we really absorb the teaching into our own mind stream and achieve the corresponding realization on our own.

The venerable Shariputra: Venerable, or *ayusmat* in Sanskrit, is an honorific form of address. It is just like the forms of address that we use when we often say “great abbot”, “eminent”, or “elder”.

Here the name Shariputra refers to one of the Buddha’s ten great disciples, who manifested as an arhat. Following the Indian custom, because the name of Shariputra’s mother was Sari, based on his mother’s name he was in turn named “son of Sari”, that is, Shariputra.

In this sutra, it is Shariputra who addresses questions to Avalokiteshvara. No ordinary being is capable of asking questions of this kind. In his appearance, Shariputra is an arhat, yet according to several commentators he is actually a bodhisattva. His wisdom is the foremost among all of the Buddha's disciples.

Because the *Heart Sutra* is the condensed version of the Prajnaparamita sutras, prajna is its subject matter, therefore it is meant to develop the practitioners' wisdom. In this view, it was exclusively congruous with the main point of the scripture to have Shariputra, the foremost in wisdom, step to the fore. This is just like many other scriptures, such as the *Diamond Sutra*, in which among all disciples, the Buddha addresses Subhuti, the "foremost in the understanding of emptiness". In the case of the *Heart Sutra*, if one did not possess certain level of wisdom, it was impossible to raise profound questions concerning emptiness.

By the power of the Buddha: Even as the foremost of the arhats, he would still need the Buddha's empowerment, in order to be able to ask the profound questions about emptiness. Otherwise, it would be relatively hard for anyone to ask even a single, profound question about emptiness.

Son or daughter of noble qualities: Literally it means sons or daughters of the lineage, or of the family, which in general, can

be understood to mean someone who has awakened to his or her buddha nature, the innate potential for enlightenment. In this sutra, this term particularly refers to practitioners who have deep admiration for the spiritual practices as embodied in the six perfections, and whose mind is gripped by the powerful compassion that aspires to liberate all sentient beings from suffering. Or to put it simply, it refers to an individual whose spiritual inclination toward the bodhisattva path has been awakened.

In sum, the general meaning of this passage is that, at that time, by the power of the Buddha, Shariputra asked the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara a question: "There are many beings in the world who wish to practice the perfection of wisdom, but they find it difficult, and so, if a son or a daughter of noble qualities genuinely wishes to practice the Prajnaparamita, and to train in the emptiness of the Prajnaparamita, how should he or she practice, how should he or she train?"

THE ANSWER

C2. Answer the Question

D1. A Brief Instruction on How to Practice Prajnaparamita

As these words were spoken, Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great being, replied to the venerable Shariputra, saying, "If a son or a daughter of noble qualities wishes to train in the practice of the profound perfection of wisdom, he or she should observe that the five aggregates are empty of inherent existence in this way.

By the power of the Buddha, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara then provided an answer to this question. In this world, if there are sons or daughters of noble qualities, who wish to practice the profound Prajnaparamita, they should contemplate it by way of the five aggregates being empty.

In certain scriptures of definitive teaching, it is asserted that, although Avalokiteshvara has become a buddha a long time ago,

abiding in countless worlds with the appearance of a buddha to help living beings, he just appears by the side of Buddha Shakyamuni as a bodhisattva for the sake of living beings.

The receptacle world, and the world of sentient beings are both collected in the five aggregates. Similarly, the twelve faculties, the eighteen constituents, the twelve links of dependent origination, can be all summarized by the five aggregates. Therefore, the five aggregates contain everything.

Here the sutra tells us that, regardless of whether one practices the six perfections, or any other teaching, one should practice by way of contemplating the emptiness of inherent existence. In other words, one should reflect as follows: in ultimate truth, everything is beyond all conceptual elaborations, and beyond all linguistic distinctions; whereas in relative truth, everything is like an illusion, a dream, a bubble, a shadow. This is the fundamental way to contemplate the emptiness of inherent existence.

In his commentary on the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, Ju Mipham Rinpoche says, “The method to contemplate the Prajnaparamita is, in ultimate truth, to practice by way of taking everything as empty space, beyond all grasping, and beyond all conceptual elaborations; and, in relative truth, to practice by

way of taking everything as both appearing and lacking inherent existence.”

The Practice of the *Heart Sutra*

Why did the Buddha manifest himself in meditative absorption in order to teach this sutra? We can say that the Buddha’s implication here is to point out that we must contemplate on the Prajna-paramita’s teaching on emptiness. Lacking such contemplation, we will be unable to attain any realization.

The meditation practice of the *Heart Sutra* is extremely important. But if we do not understand it, the whole thing will only amount to a daily memorization of the *Heart Sutra*. It will be a mere verbal recitation, and its actual efficacy will not be as great as we should expect. Therefore, when we engage recitation, we must also engage reflection and we must put the teaching into practice.

As Khenpo Sodargye said in his teaching, the *Heart Sutra*’s teaching on emptiness is extremely rare to meet during millions of cosmic ages and we are indeed lucky to have met with this teaching. Therefore, we should leave everything else to the side as much as we can, and try to find more time to contemplate on the sutra’s contents.

So in brief, everyone should practice the Prajnaparamita, no matter if one is a son or a daughter of noble qualities. But how do we practice? It is by holding the view that the five aggregates are empty. As for us ordinary beings, we apprehend that the five aggregates including forms, feelings, perceptions, etc., are empty of inherent existence by means of conceptual thought; after we realize the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena, we then clearly perceive that the five aggregates are empty by means of the actual realization of the two selflessnesses.

Indeed, it should be within our reach, as ordinary beings, to hold our practice by means of the view that the five aggregates are empty. For example, when we perform prostrations or recite mantras, we should understand that, in relative truth, such illusory and dream-like forms of merit accumulation are really existent and indispensable; and in ultimate truth, however, they are beyond conceptual elaboration, just like empty space, which is immaculate and undefiled.

If we engage practice with this view, we will gradually let go of the grasping to the five aggregates, in which we so often become involved in daily life. Eventually, we will be able to thoroughly eliminate our conception of a self. And if we eliminate our conception of a self, the grasping to the five aggregates linked with the

conception of a self will dissolve naturally. To practice in this way is the fundamental practice of the *Heart Sutra*.

THE FOUNDATIONAL PRAJNAPARAMITA

D2. An Extensive Elaboration on Prajnaparamita

In this part, we will comment extensively on the themes of the Prajnaparamita from the three aspects, which are the foundational Prajnaparamita, the path Prajnaparamita, and the resultant Prajnaparamita. We can include all things among the categories of foundation, path, and result. In practice, we should first ascertain the foundation of all things; next, the engagement of this foundation is the practice of the path; and further, as the path is crossed, we finally reach the culminating position, and this is the result. Indeed, when we explain the Great Perfection, the Mahamudra, or just the essential points of the Sutrayana, we always do so from the perspective of the foundation, the path, and the result. It is quite important for practitioners to establish and to gain knowledge of the foundation, the path, and the result.

In this part, Avalokiteshvara first discusses the emptiness of the foundation elements, such as the five aggregates, the twelve sense bases, and the eighteen constituents. He then discusses the emptiness of the path elements, such the twelve links of dependent origination, and the four noble truths. Finally, moving on to the elements of the result, he elucidates the emptiness of the Buddha's wisdom.

The Five Aggregates

Because we are seeking to perceive both the appearances of five aggregates and their emptiness, it is important to understand what the five aggregates are and how they are empty. This is one of the *Heart Sutra's* main points.

According to *Abhidharmakosha*, whatever exists in this phenomenal world can be condensed into two groups: compounded things and un-compounded things. Nothing whatsoever falls outside these two categories. The five aggregates belong to the category of compounded things, and in fact include them all.

Aggregate is called *skandha* in Sanskrit, means that many things piled together, not just a single and independent thing. The five aggregates are the aggregate of forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.

1 The Aggregate of Forms

Forms include the five sense faculties and their objects, as well as a slightly more problematic category called invisible form, or invisible materiality, which we won't go into here.

The sense faculties are not the ordinary sense organs, such as our eyes and ears and so on, but subtle forms within the sense organs. They have particular shapes which are described very precisely in *Abhidharma*.

The objects of the eyes, visual forms, means the various colors and shapes that appear to our eyes. They may be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

The objects of the ears, sounds, may occur naturally or be man-made, or a combination of the two. A lot of sounds are just meaningless noise, but some impart meaning, for example, the sublime, liberating message of the Dharma. As with sights, sounds can be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

The objects of the noses, smells or odors can be natural or artificial, and once again, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

The objects of the tongues, tastes are said to be of six kinds, roughly translated as sweet, sour, bitter, hot, astringent and pungent.

The objects of the bodies, textures, or tactile sensations, may be felt on the body's surface or in its interior. Interior textures include hunger and thirst, and the feelings that come with being ill or deeply relaxed.

So generally, the aggregate of forms includes all that we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch, and also the subtle faculties that do the seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching.

2 The Aggregate of Feelings

Here feelings do not mean emotional feelings, but something more like sensations. There are the painful, pleasant and neutral sensations in the body and the pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations in the mind. Feelings are important because they are the basis for desire and aversion. We like to have happy, pleasurable feelings, and we reject feelings of sadness. So it conditions our mental states and determines what we experience in the end.

3 The Aggregate of Perceptions

Perception means the apprehension of a specific object, as circumscribed and distinct from something else. It is defined as "that which grasps or identifies characteristics". Perception could be non-conceptual, in the case of the five physical senses, or conceptual, as in the perception of thoughts and ideas.

The five non-conceptual sense perceptions are regarded as discerning when they are operating normally and perceiving their proper objects: colors & shapes, sounds, smells, tastes and textures. Mental perception is said to be discerning when it distinguishes identities or names. This happens when (a) mind recognizes an object and associates it with its name, and (b) the mind knows what is referred to when a name is given.

4 The Aggregate of Mental Formations

It basically refers to thoughts and emotions, or what are technically referred to as the mental states. Although there are many possible mental states, the *Abhidharma* teachings speak of fifty-one, which are held to be particularly important.

Sensation and perception are actually included in these fifty-one mental states, but are treated separately in the list of the five aggregates because they are especially noticeable.

5 The Aggregate of Consciousness

According to the Mind-Only school, there are eight types of consciousness. The first five types are the consciousness of the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching), which are non-conceptual, and the sixth one is the consciousness of mental

objects, like thoughts, ideas and emotions. The seventh is the defiled mental consciousness and the eighth is alaya consciousness, or all-ground consciousness.

The defiled mental consciousness is closely connected with the ego and is where the notion of “I” and “mine” enters into experience. It is absent in the meditation of noble beings, but never ceases in the mind stream of an ordinary being.

The alaya consciousness is described as a storehouse, in which we keep all our habits and instincts, the imprints or seeds of our actions which will ripen into future experiences.

To summarize, the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness are compounded and interdependent things. None of them is a solid or single entity, but is rather a combination of many things. We never exist for one moment outside of these five aggregates. They are the foundation of samsara, the enablers of our clinging and attachment. They are also, however, the key to our enlightenment, for it is only by our understanding of them, by our gaining a clear picture of what they are and how they function, enlightenment can become present in our mind stream.

E1. The Natural Prajnaparamita

F1. The Emptiness of Five Aggregates

G1. The Emptiness of Form

Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness; emptiness is not other than form.

These four sentences teach the emptiness of the five aggregates, which can be regarded as the heart of the *Heart Sutra*. The meaning of this passage is that material forms are emptiness, and that emptiness is material forms; there are no material forms beyond emptiness, and there is no emptiness beyond material forms. This is the *Heart Sutra's* main point and its essence. If we can gain a genuine understanding of the non-duality of form and emptiness, then the other themes of the *Heart Sutra*, such as the remaining four aggregates, the twelve sense bases, the eighteen constituents, the twelve links of dependent origination, and the four noble truths, can be ascertained by the same method.

Beginners always feel perplexed in this regard, for they find this perspective to be contradictory. How can the very things that I myself see and feel, such as, for example, this microphone or this cup, be emptiness? And how about this empty space in front of me, how can it be inseparable from form? This is impossible! If my

teacup is emptiness, then how can it contain tea? It is certainly not emptiness.

Those who propound this view have not understood the doctrinal principle of emptiness in Buddhism. From beginningless time, we have believed that the real world is simply the things around us that we can see or feel, and emptiness are those that we cannot see or feel. Yet, in reality, it is not so. If we analyze, all phenomena in this world are devoid of an inherent existence, and as long as the intrinsic nature of one thing is nonexistent, it is emptiness.

Some might engage the following thought: "Since everything is empty, we must not grasp to anything, we must give up on everything, and so there is nothing at all that we must do." It is indeed not so. The emptiness that is taught in Buddhism is the emptiness of nature and not the emptiness of characteristics. Buddhism never denies the appearance of all phenomena. To us deluded beings, the characteristics of appearance are definitely existent. Appearance, however, is not separate from emptiness, and emptiness is also not separate from appearance. Appearance and emptiness are both actually a single entity. This, in turn, is called the emptiness of nature in dependent origination.

Two Metaphors of Emptiness

In the commentary on the *Heart Sutra* by Taranatha, the great Tibetan master of the Jonang tradition, there is a simile that aptly illustrates this issue. To the eyes of a person affected by jaundice, a white conch appears as yellow, so yellow is the color that this person sees at that very moment. Yet, in truth, the white conch is not yellow at all, and there is absolutely no yellow color in the conch. Only to the eyes of a person affected by jaundice, it appears as yellow, because that person is unable to see the white conch. In reality, the white color is merely the true aspect of the conch. Therefore, we can say: To those people whose eyes are damaged, the white conch is simply yellow, and the yellow conch is simply white. The yellow conch will not be other than the white conch, and likewise the white conch will not be other than the yellow conch.

Similarly, emptiness can be compared to the white conch, and the yellow conch can be compared to the material things that we perceive. Just like the white color is the original nature of the conch, emptiness is the real nature of all material things. The material things that we perceive in this very moment, whether a teacup, a bottle, or a pillar, all have a color, a shape, the quality of obstructiveness, and exist as discrete solid appearances. In reality, however, at the right moment they appear in this way, they are

emptiness. The perceptions of all buddhas and bodhisattvas is such an unobstructed, great, luminous emptiness. Moreover, this great, luminous emptiness is not separate from appearance.

The commentary on the *Heart Sutra* by Rongton Mawé Senge, and the *Trilogy on Rest* by Longchenpa, both take the analogy of the reflection of the moon in the water to refer to emptiness. The moon in the water is emptiness, and emptiness is the moon in the water. Emptiness is not different from the moon in the water, and the moon in the water is not different from emptiness. In this regard, the Buddha emphasized that appearances that we perceive are actually not separate from emptiness; they are just like the reflection of the moon in the water, or the appearance in a dream. From this perspective, since all phenomena are devoid of inherent existence, we say they are emptiness.

Cut the Attachment to the Four Extremes

According to the doctrine of the Middle Way, we can also ascertain this statement through the negation of the four extremes, which are existence, non-existence, both existence and non-existence, and neither existence nor non-existence. These four extremes are respectively the grasping of common beings and non-Buddhists, the grasping of hearers and solitary buddhas, and the grasping of bodhisattvas.

1 Form Is Emptiness

The reason why the text says “**form is emptiness**” is that ordinary beings grasp to existence, that is, we have strong attachment to material things, and regard all objects as truly existent. In this regard, what the Buddha is telling us is: “Ordinary beings believe in truly existent things such as the bottle and the pillar, while in fact these things are not separate from emptiness, so one must not grasp to the material characteristics of external objects.” This is the refutation of the extreme of existence.

For us ordinary beings, even though we might make a great effort during an entire lifetime, in the end our pains will come to nothing, and our deeds will rather follow us in our future lives, and there we will receive their reward, as we will be subjected to the sufferings of cyclic existence. The root cause of all these sufferings is our ignorance, or the lack of the knowledge that everything does not truly exist but is just a rainbow-like appearance that we can never grasp. Due to our ignorance, we have this wrong perception that everything is a solid and permanent entity, just like the person affected by jaundice seeing the white conch as yellow. So once we have this wrong perception, we develop the wrong view, and then based on the wrong view, all our actions only become the cause of suffering and afflictions, and in turn, the cause of the endless journey in samsara.

2 Emptiness Is Form

The reason why the text says “**emptiness is form**” is that hearers and solitary buddhas regard the emptiness in the selflessness of persons as truly existent, or their nirvana as truly existent. Thus, they have a grasping to this emptiness. “**Emptiness is form**” can be employed to refute their assertion. The emptiness in the selflessness of persons is actually not separate from material forms, for material things are also referents for purity and luminosity. Such state of purity and luminosity is not completely nonexistent. The extreme of nonexistence, in which hearers and solitary buddhas engage, is thus refuted.

In sum, when we see a cup, which seems to be solidly existent, the appearance of this cup is exactly emptiness. It has no true material entity. This is the meaning of “**form is emptiness**”. Yet, although it has no true material entity, the cup can still contain tea, for it is not absolutely and merely empty, or the so-called nothingness. This is the meaning of “**emptiness is form**”.

When the Middle Way engages analysis by the reasoning of the vajra-splinter or by the reasoning that refutes production of the existent and of the non-existent, material forms are entirely nonexistent, and yet it is in this very nonexistence that everything can become manifest. We should not understand these statements in

the wrong way that initially this cup is existent, but after having engaged analysis, it has then become empty. Indeed, it is empty at the very moment it contains water; and it can contain water while it is empty.

“**Form is emptiness**” reflects the fundamental empty nature of all form. “**Emptiness is form**” is the appreciation of interdependent origination. From the coming together of causes and conditions arise—from emptiness—all the beautiful forms, feelings, and perceptions that we experience, which are the appearance of this phenomenal world. It is the beauty of emptiness that allows all forms to arise, not as singular entities or things, but as the coming together of forms.

3 Form Is Not Other than Emptiness

The third and the fourth verses, “**form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form**”, were spoken for certain bodhisattvas, because they still retain a subtle grasping to the two extremes of “both existence and non-existence” and “neither existence nor nonexistence”.

Certain bodhisattvas see form and emptiness as two contrasting things. If it is form, it cannot be empty, and if it is empty, it cannot be form. Although the text says “**form is emptiness, emptiness is form**”, they might still feel as if these are two things that exist there

in a unified state, both existence and non-existence forged together somehow. Indeed, all phenomena are fundamentally the perfectly unobstructed non-duality of form and emptiness. Therefore, in order to refute the bodhisattva's grasping to these two conceptions, the Buddha said, "**form is not other than emptiness.**" Form and emptiness are not two separate entities. They are perfectly unified, without the slightest duality.

In the third statement, the Buddha intends to free us from the concept that there are both existence and non-existence, since it is not the ultimate level of truth, but still a level of clinging and fixation to the idea that there are two different, independent entities which are joined. In the state free from all extreme concepts, emptiness and form have always existed intimately as one. So "**form is not other than emptiness**" is really presenting the logic of the union of emptiness and appearance.

4 Emptiness Is Not Other than Form

Once having the understanding that the ideas of existence and non-existence are faulty and extreme, we can simply know that the ideas that existence and non-existence do not exist is still an extreme position. Therefore, the final statement tells us that we should transcend the grasping to the conceptions that there is neither existence nor non-existence. These four statements are able

to subvert our ability to hold onto any position or extreme, and then we are cut loose from the cycle of dualistic concepts to rest in the state of emptiness. Thus we know that the actual state of emptiness is beyond all conceptual thoughts and elaborations.

The Reality of Forms

According to the teaching on buddha nature, we can have deeper understanding on the true reality of forms. The real forms are the forms of buddha nature, or the realm of reality. For us ordinary beings, we cannot see it, because it pertains to the realm of buddhas and bodhisattvas. This is comparable to the white conch, which can only be seen by individuals whose eyes are not damaged by jaundice. Those whose eyes are damaged will not see the white conch. All they will see is the yellow conch.

However, in either case, we should be aware of that, emptiness is not mere nothingness, but the entity of the realm of reality which is luminous and free from conceptual elaboration. So the conch can also serve as an analogy for the inexpressible realm of reality. For different individuals, it appears differently, but regardless of whether one's eyes are or are not affected, that which is seen is just a conch. Likewise, regardless of appearances, the entity of all things is the realm of reality, which is luminous and free from conceptual elaboration.

So the luminous and nonconceptual entity of the realm of reality is truly existent. But the way of existence is not established by means of the conceptual mind of us ordinary beings, such as reflection on shape and color, or through linguistic expression. In contrast, it exists in a way that entirely transcends language and reflection, a way that cannot be expressed.

Some may wonder, how can everything appear in emptiness? Indeed, this is the capability of our own buddha nature. All kinds of appearance pertain to the subtle workings of the mind, or in other words, anything can become manifested by the subtle powers of the mind.

Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *The Lion Roar: A Commentary on the Essence of the Tathagatas* and other commentaries by great masters investigated one particular question: whether exterior, insentient things, possess the essence of the *tathagatas*. Indeed, insentient things are but one subtle aspects of the essence of the *tathagatas*, because insentient things are also one manifestation of the mind. The fundamental nature of the mind is emptiness, and within the emptiness of the mind, such material forms can indeed be manifested.

Non-existence from the Scientific Point of View

Anyone who has studied Physics, or who has some knowledge of Quantum Mechanics, is aware of the following: All matter that is

visible to the eye is composed of molecules; molecules subdivide into atoms; atoms subdivide into electrons and the atomic nucleus; the atomic nucleus subdivides into protons and neutrons; these, then, divide into the even smaller quarks; and after quarks we still have subquarks. Today, we know that below subquarks there is a quantum field.

So in the theory of Quantum Mechanics, we have the convertibility of mass and energy: any matter, such as a bottle, or a pillar, is convertible into energy. In other words, everything, including the very earth that sustains our existence, and our very flesh and body, is convertible into energy.

But what is this quantum field or energy field? It is space-like energy that cannot be seen or touched. Put another way, all there is behind any idea concerning matter is only a field. Beyond this field, there is nothing real. For example, when we look at this cup, this cup is made of energy. Therefore, it does not possess a physical entity that is obstructive and real. This energy is not obtained through conversion. Energy is simply simultaneous with material existence.

Therefore, even when we engage analysis from the perspective of physics, we reach the conclusion that, ultimately, whether a bottle, an atom, or a quark, anything cannot truly exist. As the

fundamental entity of things is nonexistent, how can things not be emptiness? This point of view is much closer to that of Buddhism. Certainly, from a Buddhist perspective, this view is not an ultimate view, because Quantum Physicists still grasp onto the real existence of a field, and so they fall far short from a Buddhist position.

Some might ask, "Scientists engaged a step-by-step analysis of matter with scientific equipment, and then reached the conclusion of quantum field. How does Buddhism ascertain emptiness?" We can say that the modes through which Buddhism ascertains emptiness are quite numerous, each with its own benefits. Of these, a simple method whose logic is rather similar to that of Physics is to engage analysis, as earlier in the method of Physics, of the coarse substance of, say, a bottle. Then, when we reach down to the level of energy, which contemporary Physics cannot analyze in more detail, we take a step further and ascertain emptiness through methods such as the great reasoning of dependent origination, and the reasoning that refutes production from the existent and from the nonexistent.

For example, take the following questions: "How is energy produced?" "Is it energy that was previously existent and that is produced again, or is it energy that is produced and that was previously completely nonexistent?" In the case of the former, we incur in the error of unnecessary production, since energy

was already existent. In the case of the latter, we ask again: “Is this energy produced by causes and conditions, or is it produced without a cause?”

If it is produced without a cause, we incur the error of endless production. If it is produced by causes and conditions, then, because a result is produced by a cause, if the cause and result are related, then the causal element exists at the same time with the result element. And, since the result element is already existent, it is unnecessary for it to be produced again. But if cause and result are not related, then how can the causal element have a function in the production of the result element? Eventually, through a series of deductions, this thing we know as energy also vanishes without a trace, becoming something that it is only possible to imagine thanks to our conceptual thoughts, but which, in reality, is something that is completely nonexistent.

Buddhism surpasses science also in so far as the statements of Quantum Physics are scientific findings that common people are both unable to experiment and to infer directly. In contrast, the Buddha does not ask anyone in the world to accept the “findings” of his realization. He takes a step further. He helps ordinary beings to directly infer his conclusions on emptiness by means of logical reasonings that are accessible to all. Moreover, if one wishes to take a step further, to put the Buddha’s teaching into practice, he or she

can experience directly the realm of emptiness that the Buddha himself realized.

The Illusion of the Self

From the foregoing reasoning we realize that our eyes perceive the substance of different kinds of forms. And yet, when we track the essence of this substance, we end up with empty hands. When we do not examine it, the bottle seems like to exist; but if we examine it in detail, we realize that the so called bottle actually does not exist.

Again, let us take this building as an example. We believe this is a real and indivisible house. Yet in truth it is made of many kinds of building materials. There is no essence of the house apart from a pile of building materials. Can you recognize which, among the broken pieces of such building materials, is the house? It is impossible.

Many of us may think, "I am sitting here, taking a class." But indeed, we overlook one gap in this logic. Ultimately speaking, where is what the so called the "I"? Is it in our body, or is it outside? Most people will answer by saying: "It is certainly in my body, for it cannot be outside." We then go on and ask: "Given that it is within your body, in what part of your body is it, is it in the head, in the torso, in the four limbs, or is in some other place?" Many of

us know that there are people who are deprived of the four limbs are still alive.

If we believe that what we call the “I” is in our brains or in our hearts, we can then further analyze the brain and the heart. Eventually, after we search for it in each part through our analysis, we will be unable to find the place where this “I” exists. Perhaps, some will say, even though it is impossible to find it in any part of the body, we still have a soul, and that will be the so called “I”.

But what is this soul? Essentially, it is nothing but an idea or a concept. We can analyze such an idea or concept on account of the length of time, and again it can be analyzed down to emptiness. We can say, without exaggeration, that no matter what we regard as an “I”, the reasonings of the Middle Way can refute it completely.

There is another reason that we can realize the emptiness of all things: if all things were truly existent, their entities would be fixed and unchanging, yet it is not so in reality. Take, for example, sound itself. Some people will regard a sound as pleasant and melodious, whereas other will regard it as unpleasant and unrefined. Take a bottle of wine for example. Those who like to drink will see its coloring as translucent and penetrating, will feel as if its fragrance is aromatic and long-lasting, its flavor rich and refreshing, the sound of it being poured into a glass the jingling of silver threads,

and the feeling of it being ingested and reaching the stomach comparable to walking among clouds. It can truthfully be called a manifold wonder for color, sound, smell, taste, and touch. But to those who are allergic to alcohol, or who do not enjoy drinking, all such sensations are basically impossible to find, for it is spicy and pungent to smell, bitter and piercing to drink, and as soon as it gets into the stomach after ingestion it makes one sick. No matter what, there will be no wonderful feeling. If this wine was something that is truly existent, it would only possess a fixed essence. Yet, in reality, it accommodates different opinions, for everyone has a different view on how he or she feels about it.

These reasonings illustrate that both the “I” and external objects do not exist as real essences, and are beyond such artificial entities. It is only through their conceptual minds that people apprehend such illusions as an “I” or as external objects. The truth of emptiness will emerge only as we get rid of these deceiving semblances by means of the Buddhist doctrine.

Ordinary Beings’ Perceptions

We cannot decide if things are existent or nonexistent only on the basis of our own perception, because our sense organs are essentially mistaken. For example, if you deem something as existent on account of your eyes being able to see it, and to be

simply nonexistent on account of your being unable to see it, then, what would you say of all matter that we cannot see with the naked eye, such as the X rays, the ultraviolet rays, the infrared rays, molecules, atoms, neutrons, protons, and electrons, and the very air that we generally regard as completely empty, but which contains particles and elements such as nitrogen and oxygen? Would you still say they are all nonexistent?

Also, we normally regard a table as something that is still and immobile. Yet, in reality, each and every atom that forms the table is in constant flux.

Take, as a further example, something we dream of during sleep that we can both see and touch. In a dream, when we eat we can eat with satisfaction, when we climb a mountain we can get drenched in sweat, when a tiger devours us we will cry out in great pain. Still, does this mean that dream states are truly existent?

You might then say, "Dream sensations are blurry, while upon waking perceptions are clearer; dream events are constantly and incessantly changing, with no logic, whereas real events are rather stable, and understandable according to logic; sooner or later people wake from dreams, while after they are awake they cannot further awaken."

But sometimes you may have had a kind of dream where sensations are particularly clear, and the dream state is so realistic to the degree that you cannot say that you are dreaming, because you believe that everything in the dream is real. So, how can you tell whether your entire life, the life you experience during the waking state, is not such a dream, the one that has been going on for a longer time?

In truth, in most dreams we actually do not know we are dreaming, and we find out it was a dream only upon waking. Likewise, could it be that we do not know that our waking life is a dream, perhaps, only because we have not yet awakened from this great dream? In principle, what is the real difference between dreams and the waking state? Indeed, any time we wake up from a dream, we can ask the same question to ourselves: "How do I determine whether what I have just experienced was a dream, or whether what I am now experiencing is a dream?"

The fact that in a dream we might be aware of nonexistent things as existent, illustrates that our sensations are very unreliable. Thus, the self that we are aware of during the waking state, together with the world that surrounds us, might also be an illusory perception, a dream-like illusion.

That our sensations are mistaken is proven by countless facts. Everything in the universe, from the sun, the moon, and the stars, up to all plants, insects, and fish, every single thing is the mere appearance of form, and the only truth behind the appearance of form is emptiness.

In Buddhist scriptures, there is such an example. If, on a moonless night, you light an incense stick, and if you draw a circle in the air with it, you will see a shining circle, yet we all know that in reality there is no circle such as a wheel in the air, but only a piece of incense, which was lit is now being turned around in circles. Because our eyes lack the power to distinguish it, all we see in its place is a wheel. The Buddha called such a circle the “wheel of spinning fire”, which in reality is nonexistent. He employed this phenomenon to characterize the appearances apprehended by common people, which are nothing but their delusion.

Appearance within Emptiness

To be sure, the Buddha never negated conventional phenomena, for he would never say, “This cup is empty, therefore it cannot be utilized to contain tea.” These phenomena can all be established in mistaken and illusory perception. However, these phenomena are not unlike the images that we see in dreams. Although we can see them and touch them, they cannot stand for the real existence of

such dream realms. Or else, these phenomena can be likened to the moon in water. Although it appears to be like the real moon, yet in truth it is only a reflection, a mere mistaken perception.

Why do these phenomena exist? It is the function of dependent origination. When causes and conditions gather together, inconceivable things will manifest. The truth of dependent origination is profound, and it would be somewhat hard to understand it all at once. However, if we study a few extra works in the Middle Way, and if we engage practice according to the view explained there, we will eventually understand its profound meaning.

It should be clear that, when we talk about emptiness, “empty” does not refer to the empty space in and outside a bottle. This is comparable to an actor with outstanding performing skills. Although he or she can change all kinds of different makeups and costumes, and he or she can play all kinds of different roles, it will still be him or her, no matter what, for he or she will not have changed because of a different costume, or because of a different role. “Emptiness” is like this, too. Regardless of the different expressions of emptiness, its fundamental nature is constant and unchanging.

The Two Truths

To have a better understanding of the connection between our perceptions of this phenomenal world and its true reality, we need to talk about the theory of the two truths, relative truth and absolute truth.

Everything has an absolute aspect, or absolute truth, and a relative aspect, or relative truth. The absolute or ultimate truth is about the inherent nature of everything, how things really are. The conventional or relative truth is about how things appear. We ordinary people may perceive sort of relative truth, that is, the relative world in all its diversity, through our everyday use of mind and our sense faculties. We do not usually consider the objects of our senses, what we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch, to be devoid of intrinsic existence. The everyday world is something we consider to be absolutely, independently existing. However, it is only through rigorous and penetrating analysis are we able to understand absolute truth, the true nature of all things and phenomena. And only through our own Dharma practice can we reveal the tenuousness and relativity hidden from their appearance and realize the truly empty nature of all phenomena.

Generally speaking, our mundane mind tends to understand the two truths as two separate, independent things, but actually they

are two aspects of a single reality. From seeing only relative truth, we will eventually reach a profound certainty in the meaning of absolute truth. From understanding and further realizing the meaning of absolute truth, we will become more careful of our actions, speeches and thoughts. Relative truth functions inexorably within absolute truth. A thorough realization of the empty nature of all phenomena has never led anyone to think that positive actions do not bring happiness, or that negative actions do not bring suffering. All phenomena appear from within emptiness as a result of the coming together of illusory causes and conditions. The infinite display of phenomena can arise only because everything is empty in nature. As Nagarjuna said:

*Only by things being empty,
Can things be possible at all.*

Padmasambhava also said, "Although my view is higher than the sky, my attention to actions and their effects is finer than flour." When our realization of emptiness becomes as vast as the sky, we will gain an even greater conviction about the law of cause and effect, and we will see just how important our conduct really is. Likewise, if we have a thorough understanding of the way phenomena appear through dependent arising, it will not be difficult for us to understand the view of emptiness while

remaining in meditation. On arising from such a meditation, we will recognize clearly the direct relationship between actions and their results. This will enable us to discriminate easily between positive and negative actions.

Once we realize the true nature of emptiness, our perception would be simply like what Thogme Zangpo once said in a humble way, “All the joys and sufferings of this world are just projections of our minds and the result of our past karma. As I have a little understanding that in relative truth everything is like an illusion, and that in absolute truth everything is utterly beyond conceptual fabrications, I don’t experience attachment and hatred at all.”

G2. The Emptiness of the Other Four Aggregates

In the same way, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are also empty.

In the foregoing we provided a clear explanation of how the form aggregate relates with emptiness. And so, if form is emptiness, then the same reasoning follows for feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, for all aggregates can be refuted by means of the analysis of form. It was not necessary to add extra words here, therefore Avalokiteshvara just touches upon feelings,

perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, by the phrase **“in the same way”**.

At the outset, the Buddha skillfully leads us to analyze form, as we understand that the essence of form is emptiness, we then easily know the principle that the essence of all things is also emptiness. In an eloquent manner, and with the easiest of examples, the Buddha thus awakens us, and leads us to understand the deepest principles without any difficulty. This shows the Buddha’s peculiarity, the symbol of his wisdom of supreme awakening.

In sum, to expand what the sutra says above, it would say:

Feeling is emptiness, emptiness is feeling, feeling is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than feeling;

Perception is emptiness, emptiness is perception, perception is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than perception;

Mental formation is emptiness, emptiness is mental formations, mental formation is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than mental formation;

Consciousness is emptiness, emptiness is consciousness, consciousness is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than consciousness.

F2. The Sevenfold Profundity

Therefore, Shariputra, all phenomena are emptiness, that is, with no characteristics, no production, no cessation, no stains, no purity, no increase, no decrease.

The Sevenfold Profundity

The Tibetan and the Chinese versions of this passage are different in some respects. In the Tibetan version, it is eight profundities that are beyond all conceptual elaborations: (1) emptiness, (2) no characteristics, (3) no production, (4) no cessation, (5) no stains, (6) no purity, (7) no increase, and (8) no decrease. Yet several Chinese translations only mention seven profundities. For this reason, Khenpo Sodargye explained this teaching as the sevenfold profundity, in which, the first and second is combined as one, the emptiness of characteristics.

1 The Emptiness of Characteristics

This means that not only are all things empty of inherent nature, but also their very characteristics are emptiness. Like in the *Diamond Sutra* it is said, “All appearances are illusory.” Ordinary living beings believe that all appearance, such as sound, form or taste, possess essential characteristics that are pleasant to hear, beautiful to behold, and delicious to taste, and that such characteristics

are truly existent, so they strongly cling to such characters. On the surface everything has characteristics, such as men, women, mountains, rivers, and planet, each and every thing has its own characteristic way of appearing. But indeed, this is a mere designation, fabricated by a conceptual thought. If we understand this point, we will easily understand that a subject, that is, the apprehender of characteristics, is also nonexistent. Thus, we will ascertain the fundamental entity of all things as emptiness.

2 No Production and No Cessation

On the surface, all things possess the appearance of being produced by the gathering of causes and conditions. For example, the production of the new sprouts in the spring; the production of fresh, blooming flowers and lush vegetation in the summer; the production of ripe fruit and the leaves turning red in the fall; the production of the pure, white snow in the winter, etc. Indeed, the productions of all these things only belong to the illusion of the ordinary people, because ultimately speaking, there is no real production.

Some may wonder, "Is not everything continually being produced and ceasing?" Indeed, these appearances are merely posited on a conventional level. When we engage genuine observation, such production cannot have a real existence. For example, if the causal

element exists at a former time, then the effect element will exist at a later time. Consequently, at the very time when the result element is produced, the causal element will have ceased. Therefore, it is not established that effects are produced from causes. If causes and effects are established simultaneously, we then incur in the fault of limitless production. Hence, what we refer to as production is fundamentally nonexistent.

Since the production of all things, is nonexistent, then abiding in the middle, and cessation in the end, cannot exist either. From this, we can understand that all things are indeed nonexistence. The three characteristics of production, abiding, and cessation, are only ascertained from the conventional perspective of conditioned things.

3 No Stains and No Purity

The term “stains” means defilement, that is, belonging to samsara. On a first glance, samsara exists. Each of the living beings of the six realms of samsara, together with the suffering they experience, their modes of subsistence and their environments, are existent. However, if we observe things in detail, the six realms of samsara are nothing but the deluded appearances of sentient beings. The term “purity” refers to nirvana. Prior to analysis, nirvana does exist. Again, when ascertained from the perspective of its fundamental

entity, nirvana is also nonexistent. Hence, both samsara, which is defiled, and nirvana, which is pure and free from defilement, are nonexistent.

4 No Increase and No Decrease

From the perspective of the resultant state, these two terms convey that ultimate reality has no real existence. From the perspective of samsara, they illustrate that both the increase of afflictions and the decrease of merit are nonexistent. From the perspective of nirvana, they illustrate that both the increase of merit and the decrease of afflictions and obstructions are nonexistent.

In general, as long as living beings remain on the level of the unawakened, afflictions and obstructions such as desire, hatred, and ignorance, will increase in their mental continuum, while virtues such as great compassion, the wisdom of non-duality, and the mind of awakening, will diminish. As they gradually approach Buddhahood, both the afflictive obstructions and the obstructions to omniscience will gradually decrease and become eventually destroyed, while the uncommon, ocean-like virtues of a buddha will increase evermore.

However, this explanation is confined to the mere perspective of the appearing aspect. If we engage the perspective of the real aspect of all things, increase and decrease turn out to be merely our

conceptual thoughts. In reality, there is absolutely neither increase nor decrease. Just like a great ocean, where the waves rise and fall without increasing or decreasing the level of water in the ocean, when living beings become buddhas, their virtues will not expand, and when they are not buddhas yet, their virtues will not diminish. In this way, there is nothing to increase or decrease.

All buddhas and bodhisattvas have had a personal realization of the truth concerning the emptiness of characteristics of all things, free from conceptual elaboration. Therefore, the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara can convey its profound meaning to Shariputra. As beginners in the study of the Prajnaparamita, we should understand the profound meaning of these teachings. We should not have blind faith in them with a lack of understanding, neither be dubious about them for no good reason. Instead, having heard the teachings on emptiness, we should try to gain personal experience through listening, reflection, and meditation.

In the foregoing, we have ascertained the subject matter of the foundational, or natural, Prajnaparamita.

THE PATH PRAJNAPARAMITA

E2. The Path Prajnaparamita

F1. Determine the Nature of the Five Aggregates as Emptiness

Therefore, Shariputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness.

Therefore: According the analysis of the natural or foundational Prajnaparamita, we can understand that the five aggregates, which include all the conditioned phenomena, do not truly exist. All the unconditioned phenomena do not exist either, for they are just conceptions based on the conditioned phenomena. So all the knowable things are by nature empty, and from here, we can easily understand that twelve sense bases, eighteen elements, twelve links of dependent origination, as well as four noble truths do not truly exist, too.

[...] in emptiness there is no form, no feelings, no perceptions, no mental formations, and no consciousness.

As we've understood that form is emptiness and emptiness is form, so within emptiness, there're no forms truly existing with an essential entity. Likewise, within emptiness, there're no feelings, perceptions, mental formations, or consciousness truly existing with an essential entity.

Some may wonder, in the previous text, it is already said that feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are empty, why is it repeated here one more time? As we can see, according to the textual outline, the previous sentence is the determination from the perspective of the foundational Prajnaparamita, and here it is analyzed from the perspective of the path Prajnaparamita.

Then in the part of the path Prajnaparamita, why did the Buddha first ascertain the empty nature of five aggregates? It is because every living being's five aggregates are formed by his or her own solid habitual tendency, and living beings have the strongest attachment to their own aggregates. This is the most difficult part to be abandoned. If living beings are able to realize the nature of five aggregates, then they won't have any strong attachment to the other phenomena.

*F2. Determine the Nature of the Twelve Sense Bases as
Emptiness*

There is no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body and no mind. There is no form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no texture, or mental objects.

The twelve sense bases include two sets of six: six sense organs, or internal sense bases, which are eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, and six sense objects, or external sense bases, which are form, sound, smell, taste, texture, and mental objects. The literal meaning of sense bases in Tibetan or in Chinese is to take birth, to erupt. This is because the six consciousnesses are completely latent, or inactive, unless erupted through the contact of six sense organs with their corresponding six objects.

For instance, when an ear and sound are present, the associated consciousness arises. The arising of these three elements—ear, sound and ear consciousness—lead to what is known as contact, which in turn causes a pleasant or unpleasant or neutral feeling to arise. It is from such a feeling that craving or aversion arises.

Based on these six pairs of sense bases, a number of mental factors arise. If we can understand clearly the relationship between these six pairs, or how consciousness depends upon contact with its

objects, then we are no longer ignorant and confused about the relationship between the external and the internal.

Relatively speaking, there are six external bases and six internal bases in our phenomenal world; ultimately speaking, however, through the rigorous observation of their nature, they are empty. For example, when we hear a sound, we may feel either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral; but when we analyze its production, its abiding and its cessation, we cannot find an essential entity of this phenomenon, and the quality of being pleasant or unpleasant only depends on observers, and different people have different feeling on it.

F3. Determine the Nature of the Eighteen Elements as Emptiness

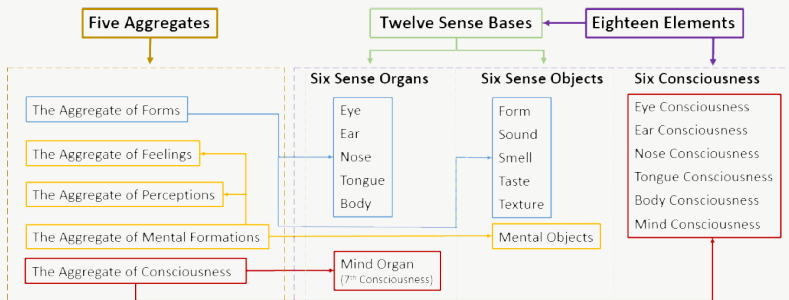
There is no eye-element, up to and including no element of mental consciousness.

Here element means seed, something very fundamental which bears its own nature and has its own type of potential. The eighteen elements are nothing but twelve sense bases plus their corresponding six resultant consciousnesses, which arise out of the contact between the six sense organs and their corresponding six objects. They describe the participating factors in perception: subject and object, and in between, which form three sets of six each. The three

sets are labelled the outer elements, inner elements, and secret elements, and their respective six subdivisions all correspond to the six different senses.

The six outer elements relating to external things correspond to the six objects of form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind. The six inner elements are related to the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind organs. They are composed of both mind and matter, and therefore are positioned between the subject (secret) and the object (outer) elements.

It is important to note that the sense organ itself is different from the sense consciousness. The organ merely supports its corresponding consciousness. For example, when we say “the eye sees”, we are not being entirely correct. It is our eye consciousness, not the organ, which is doing the seeing.



The Diagram of Five Aggregates, Twelve Sense Bases and Eighteen Elements

If we understand the empty nature of twelve sense bases, which means the six sense organs do not exist, and their objects, the six external bases do not exist either, then consequently, the six resultant consciousnesses that are formed through the contact of six sense organs and their corresponding objects do not exist too. Therefore, ultimately speaking, there're no eighteen elements.

The non-existence of the eighteen elements does not deny their appearance in front of us ordinary beings. However, at this very moment they appear, their nature are empty, and emptiness is exactly the nature of their appearance. In other words, we cannot find this so called emptiness somewhere else besides appearance, and neither can we find appearance besides emptiness. Emptiness and appearance are in perfect union, appearance is not other than emptiness, and emptiness is not other than appearance.

Therefore, the non-existence of five aggregates, twelve sense bases, or eighteen elements is not the ultimate meaning of the *Heart Sutra*, because it is just one of the four extremes. It is called similar emptiness, because it's closer to the ultimate meaning of emptiness, and especially for those living beings who have very strong habitual tendency of clinging, non-existence can be the best starting point to understand the meaning of emptiness. Eventually, we need to break through all the four extremes of our conceptual thought.

The ultimate meaning of the *Heart Sutra* is the perfect union of emptiness and appearance. Just like within a dream, there are all kinds of vivid appearances, however, those appearances are just illusions and once waking up from the dream, everything is gone and it is so obvious that none of those appearances possesses an essential and solid entity. Likewise, all the manifestations within samsara only possess the true nature of emptiness, and within emptiness there're all kinds of appearances; once waking up from our own illusion, we will realize that the appearances within samsara do not possess any essential entity, and we cannot find any trace of true existence.

F4. Determine the Nature of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination as Emptiness

There is no ignorance, and there is no extinction of ignorance, up to and including no aging and death, and no extinction of aging and death.

This sentence refers to the twelve links of dependent origination in the chain of causation. It is a summary in accordance with their sequence of evolution within the chain of samsaric existence, by which all the five aggregates, twelve sense bases, and eighteen elements interact to keep sentient beings bound in the cycle of samsaric existence, a cycle of suffering. Although just two are

mentioned specifically, the phrase “**up to and including**” actually includes all the twelve links, which are, ignorance, karmic formations, consciousness, name and form, six senses, contact, feelings, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and aging and death.

As the Buddha taught us, there are outer dependent origination and inner dependent origination. The former states that a seed produces its sprout, which gives rise to the stem, and consequently, the stalk, the fruit, and the leaves. Just as a tree comes into being under various causes and conditions, so too does everything. This is called outer dependent origination.

What is more important for us is inner dependent origination, which manifests the way that every sentient being wanders in samsara in different living forms. A human being in this life may become an animal in the afterlife, and then turn into a heavenly being in the next one. Before achieving liberation, reincarnation from life to life will continue. Such a life process can be well understood by following the teaching of the twelve links of dependent origination. If we don't understand these twelve links, we cannot fully understand the reality of reincarnation, nor can we generate true compassion toward others.

The Cycle of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination

In this cycle of samsaric existence, the first point that we should know is ignorance, and it is the root cause of samsara. Ignorance can be indicated by self-attachment, that is to say, every living being clings to “I” and “what I have”, which is the root cause of samsara. So ignorance is the **first** link of the twelve links of dependent origination. Or sometimes we can directly say that ignorance refers to a mental state that we are ignorant to the truth. Being ignorant and deluded, one can't see the truth and just ends up with wrong actions. That is, driven by self-attachment, one will create all kinds of good and bad karma through body, speech and mind. This is the **second** link of the twelve, called karmic formation. We may not exactly be aware of ignorance and karmic formation in this life, but they were generated in the past lives and are the causes that drive us to come to this world in this present life.

Karmic formation gives rise to consciousness, the **third** link, which carries all good and bad karma. Consciousness continuously exists life after life. Unlike the body, which rots away completely after death, consciousness keeps going on by taking different living forms. For example, in the bardo stage, there's only consciousness

and no physical body, and due to the previous karma, consciousness will perceive different scenarios and choose the pleasant one to be its destination, where the consciousness is bound with a physical body and starts its next life.

If it is viviparity, consciousness will descend into a womb and gives rise to name and form, the **fourth** link of the twelve. “Name” refers to the four aggregates of feelings, perception, formation and consciousness. “Form” is the aggregate of forms and refers to the physical body before it takes shape. Starting from consciousness, they are the effects of the chain in the present life.

The **fifth** one is called “six sense bases”, which means that after consciousness is linked to a womb, the six sense organs, namely, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind will gradually take shape inside the womb. So the fifth factor is called “six sense bases”, or “six sense gates”.

The coming together of six sense organs, six objects, and six corresponding consciousnesses is called contact, and it is the **sixth** link of the twelve. Six objects include forms, sounds, smells, tastes, texture, and mental objects. The **seventh** link is feelings, resulting from the contact of sense organs and their respective objects. Feelings describes three different mental states. Toward favorable objects, one has pleasant feelings. Toward unfavorable

objects, one has unpleasant feelings. And toward neither favorable nor unfavorable objects, one has neutral feelings, which is actually a mental state of ignorance.

These five links result from the causes generated in the past lives and are the effects of this present life. They consequently lead to the next three: craving, clinging, and becoming, which also belong to this life. Craving, the **eighth** link, means that one is eager to experience pleasant feelings and unwilling to experience unpleasant ones, which involves desire, aversion and ignorance. Craving plays a role equivalent to the first link, ignorance, and further develops into clinging, which means actively striving for what is pleasurable and avoiding what is painful. This is the **ninth** link, equivalent to the second link of karmic formation. Craving and clinging lead to the **tenth** link of becoming and all three are the causes of the next life, which means one acts with body, speech and mind in the present life and creates the karma that determines one's next birth, the **eleventh** link of the twelve.

No matter whether one is reborn as a human or other sentient being and no matter where one is reborn, birth is always followed by aging and death, the **twelfth** link. Each of us is destined to age and what we are doing now is conditioning and forming the next life. It keeps going on and on, and the wheel of life will never stop until we attain liberation.

The Meaning of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination

The twelve links of dependent origination explain the whole procedure of living beings taking birth and rebirth in the endless cycle of reincarnation. From the perspective of life, they include past lives, present life and future lives. Ignorance and karmic formation were caused in past lives, and they produced consciousness, name and form, six senses, contact, feelings in present life; again the next three links in the present life, craving, clinging, and becoming act as the causes of birth, aging and death in future lives. So briefly speaking, the karma accumulated in past lives is the cause of the manifestation of the present life, and in turn the karma accumulated in the present life is the cause of taking rebirth in future lives. This is exactly the karmic law of causes and effects.

The twelve links can be classified into three groups, afflictions, karma and suffering. Ignorance, craving and clinging belong to afflictions; karmic formation and becoming belong to karma; and consciousness, name and form, six senses, contact, feelings, birth, and aging and death all belong to suffering. Due to afflictions one accumulates karma, and due to karma one has to experience sufferings; while going through sufferings, one again generates afflictions and further accumulates karma. The whole procedure is such an endless cycle, and the main cause of this cycle is ignorance.

If we are able to get rid of our ignorance and have the wisdom to see the truth, then we won't crave and cling to these deluded phenomena and eventually break free from the cycle of samsaric existence.

The True Nature of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination

Generally speaking, the twelve links have the sequence of the evolution of samsara, as well as the sequence of attaining nirvana. Although both the process for taking birth in the cycle of existence and the process of gaining freedom from it do exist on the relative level, they do not exist on the ultimate level. Furthermore, since they do not exist on the ultimate level, their corresponding extinctions, or non-existence, do not exist either.

For example, ignorance, the first link of the twelve, is just a mental state that is lack of wisdom to see the truth. If we observe its entity, its origination or its cessation, we just end up with nothing. Sometimes ignorance is described as darkness. By turning on the light, the darkness in a house is immediately dispelled, even though the house had remained dark for a thousand years. But if we try to search how the darkness was produced, and where it's gone, we can get nothing. Darkness is just a temporary state of the house, and has neither birth nor cessation. Or if darkness

really had an essential entity, then there's no way to dispel it. The same goes to ignorance. It has no essential entity, and only has a nature of emptiness. Since the existence of ignorance is empty, the extinction of ignorance is also empty. That is why in the text, it is said that there's no ignorance, and no extinction of ignorance.

The main purpose of the teaching in the *Heart Sutra* is to destroy our self-attachment. It is our self-attachment that prevents us from seeing the truth. If we can get rid of self-attachment, we are no longer ignorant, and then in turn, without ignorance, we can clearly perceive the true nature of all the deluded phenomena in samsara and won't be bound in the cycle of suffering. So destroying our self-attachment is the only way to be free from samsara, and the direct antidote to self-attachment is the wisdom of emptiness. This is why the reflection and meditation on the teaching of emptiness are so essential for Dharma practitioners who seek the ultimate freedom of liberation.

F5. Determine the Nature of the Four Noble Truths as Emptiness

There is no suffering, no origin, no cessation, no path, [...]

The Four Noble Truths

Here is the negation of the main theme of first turning of the Dharma wheel, the four noble truths, which are, the truth of suffering, the truth of its origin, the truth of its cessation, and the truth of the path to its cessation.

First, our present situation, the life in cyclic existence, is suffering, which needs to be understood. Second, suffering has its own root causes, which are karma and afflictions, which need to be abandoned. Third, there is a state free from suffering which is nirvana, the cessation of suffering, that can be actualized. And fourth, there is a path to get there, which needs to be relied upon.

The four truths are the basic foundation of all the Buddha's teachings. They can be divided into two pairs of cause and effect, known as the cause and effect of samsara, thorough affliction, and the cause and effect of nirvana, complete purification.

1 The Truth of Suffering

The first noble truth is about the real situation of our life in cyclic existence, and it is the result of samsara. In order to practice the

path, we must have a clear understanding of suffering that pervades all existence, either sentient or insentient.

Though we all admit to experiencing sadness and pain in our lives, it takes further examination for most of us to perceive the more subtle modes of suffering that shadow even the happiest occasion. In Buddhist teaching, suffering means unsatisfactory, impermanent, illusive and not controllable. There are three types of suffering, the suffering upon suffering, the suffering of change and all-pervasive suffering of being conditioned. In desire realm, living beings experience all the three types of suffering; in form realm, mainly there are the suffering of change and all-pervasive suffering; and in formless realm, mainly it's all-pervasive suffering.

The suffering upon suffering includes all the miseries of the lower realms, as well as the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness and death in the higher realms, and also separation from loved ones, having to encounter what is undesirable, and not achieving what we want even after pursuing it.

As it is said, "What is the suffering upon suffering? It is that which is painful when arising, painful when remaining, and pleasant when changing." All these sufferings, big or small, are undesirable from the very first moment they appear, and are therefore understood to

be painful. What's more, there's one suffering coming after another, one being piled upon another. This is suffering upon suffering.

The suffering of change means that no matter where we find ourselves, and no matter how seemingly pleasurable and attractive our dwelling place, physical body or sensory enjoyments, our situation cannot possibly remain as it is, but is bound to change, because of not being beyond the laws of impermanence.

When it does change, what was previously a pleasurable experience becomes a source of suffering. As it is said, "The suffering of change is that which is pleasant when arising, pleasant when remaining, but painful when ceasing."

The all-pervasive suffering of being conditioned refers to all experience that is bound up with the five aggregates. No matter whether we are experiencing pleasure or suffering, or a neutral state, we are always setting ourselves up for future suffering. Why? Because our present aggregates are direct causes for our future aggregates, which will be the supports for suffering in the future.

That means all our present experiences are in some way the causes for sufferings that will come to us later on. As it is said, "The suffering of being conditioned is not apparent when it arises, remains or ceases, but it is still the cause of suffering."

2 The Truth of the Origin of Suffering

The second noble truth is the cause of samsara, karma and afflictions. Among afflictions, ignorance is the most essential one. Suffering has karmic causes that we accumulate by our own activities performed in ignorance. The twelve links of dependent origination show us a clear picture of how we are driven by ignorance and karma and bound in samsara.

3 The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

Nevertheless, it is possible for us to be free from the cycle of suffering and attain the ultimate peace. The cessation of suffering is the third noble truth, the result of nirvana. It brings freedom from suffering and the cause of suffering.

4 The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering

The cessation of suffering cannot be attained without any cause. We do need to follow a path in order to achieve this goal. This is the fourth noble truth, the path to the cessation of suffering, and it is the cause of nirvana.

There're many different paths that bring about nirvana. For example, in pure land tradition, we can chant the name of Amitabha; in Chan tradition, we can observe our own mind through meditation; in Vajrayana tradition, we can recognize the nature of mind with the

help of the enlightened master's direct pointing. Although these paths are different, they share the same goal of achieving nirvana. Different practitioners have different capacity and preference, so they can choose different paths to attain the same enlightenment.

The True Nature of the Four Noble Truths on the Ultimate Level

On the relative level, the four noble truths really exist, and it is necessary for us to understand them fully. However, on the ultimate level, none of them exist. For example, if we believe nirvana as truly existence, we fall upon the extreme of non-existence, while the ultimate nirvana is the perfect union of emptiness and luminosity. Also, the so called suffering does not have a standard measurement, or a permanent and independent quality. It is just a deluded feeling based on personal experience. Given the same situation, some feel it is pleasant, while others feel it is painful. Different feelings only depend on the karmic formation of different living beings. Therefore, suffering does not have an intrinsic existence that is independent and permanent. So the nature of suffering is emptiness.

We can further understand the four noble truths by using the metaphor of sickness. We can say that the first noble truth diagnoses a disease. If we want to cure this disease, we must find out its cause,

the second noble truth. Once we know the cause, we would be much happy to follow the prescription and to receive the treatment. The Buddha is the doctor who diagnoses the disease and prescribes the medicine. The fourth noble truth, the Dharma path is exactly the medicine that we need to take to cure the disease. By taking the medicine, it will eventually bring us to the state of complete health, nirvana, the third noble truth of cessation.

Before we are cured, we have to take the medicine, so all the four noble truths are existent in our spiritual practice. After we are cured, the sickness is completely gone and there's no need for us to keep receiving the treatment. We needn't cling to the path and the recovery state any more. So ultimately speaking, the four noble truths don't exist with essential entities.

THE RESULTANT PRAJNAPARAMITA

E3. The Resultant Prajnaparamita

[...] no wisdom, no attainment, and there is also no non-attainment.

Now we're talking about the resultant Prajnaparamita. Here **attainment** is referred to the fruits that are attained by hearers, solitary realizers, bodhisattvas, and buddhas. On relative level, there are wisdom that we can attain, and the process of such attainment does exist. However, on ultimate level, both wisdom and attainment do not exist, and they are only manifested in an illusory and dream-like way. So the resultant state of Prajnaparamita is itself empty of intrinsic existence.

Relatively speaking, the fruit and the person who seek for the fruit do exist. Without rigorous observation, we can easily say that there is such procedure of seeking for the wisdom and merit. However, in the perception of those enlightened beings who abide in the

realization of emptiness, there is no wisdom and no attainment. Like in the *Diamond Sutra*, it is said that in reality, there is no such a thing called “arhat”, and if an arhat should give rise to the thought, “I have attained the realization of the arhat”, this means that he is attached to the notions of a self, and he is not an arhat.

In Vairocana’s commentary, it is also said that because by nature, all living beings are buddhas, so there’s no new wisdom that a living being can attain after becoming a buddha. Or in other words, we already possess the buddha’s vast and profound wisdom and qualities in a perfect way, so there’s no new attainment needed any more.

No non-attainment means that because there’s no attainment, so the other corresponding extreme, non-attainment doesn’t exist either. Or another way to understand it can be referred to the relative truth, in which the paths and the resultant states of the paths exist in a dream-like way.

THE MERIT AND FRUIT OF THE REALIZATION OF EMPTINESS

D3. The Merit of the Realization of Emptiness

Therefore, Shariputra, because they have no attainment, all bodhisattvas depend on the perfection of wisdom and abide in it. Their mind is unobstructed, so they have no fear, and having passed beyond error, they will enter into final nirvana.

Since bodhisattvas have no attainment, they rely on the perfection of wisdom and abide in it and they don't have any obscuration in their minds. Here **unobstructed** means the mind has become totally cleansed of all mental afflictions. When an individual goes through a process of purifying the mind by applying the antidotes to the mental afflictions, over time, the mind becomes totally free of all these obscurations. Essentially speaking, only through actualizing the empty nature of the mind can one clean away all

mental afflictions and attain liberation. As Nagarjuna explains in his *Fundamentals of the Middle Way*, emptiness is both the means of eliminating the mental afflictions and the resultant state that one arrives at after having done so.

Having no obscuration in their minds, they have no fear. **Fear** is resulted from our obscuration, our mental afflictions that mislead us to consider everything as truly existence. According to some great masters' teaching in the Han tradition, there are five types of fear, the fear of not well living, the fear of bad reputation, the fear of death, the fear of taking rebirth in three lower realms, and the fear of others' power.

As long as we have self-attachment, we are concerned about gain and loss, and such kind of concern generates fear in our minds. Through the realization of emptiness, we can reach the state of total equanimity in all situations. As a result, there is neither hope nor fear, neither demons nor gods. This is the ultimate level of fearlessness.

So overall speaking, the true way that we exist is the way the reflection of the moon in water exists, and the true way we experience is the way the dreamer experiences. As we either struggle through our dreams or enjoy them, we do so on the assumption that what is happening is real and true in an absolute sense. But

it is true only from the context of that dream. When we awaken, everything we have just experienced are just an illusion based on emptiness. Likewise, we think we have awakened from a dream into a more real “reality”, but in fact, as we pass from sleeping to waking we have simply shifted from one dreamlike state to another. Our waking perceptions are all merely the manifestation of mental habitual tendency and karmic patterns accumulated over infinite lifetimes.

[...] having passed beyond error, they will enter into final nirvana.

And having utterly passed beyond error, one will reach the end of nirvana. Here **error** means ordinary beings’ deluded perceptions due to ignorance. For us deluded beings, we assume impermanence as permanence, suffering as happiness, no-self as the existence of self, and impurity as purity. All of these misunderstanding are caused by our own ignorance. Driven by such erroneous understanding, all living beings are trapped in samsara and have to take rebirth in any of the six realms, and set off on an endless journey of suffering.

Nirvana can be understood as the ultimate nature of one’s mind that is completely free from all mental afflictions. There are natural nirvana and resultant nirvana. Since all the aspects of one’s path

to enlightenment—one's innate capacity to attain enlightenment through the path, the path itself, and the results of the path to enlightenment—are devoid of intrinsic existence, they all possess natural nirvana.

Through cultivating insight into the nature of emptiness, one will be able to dispel and overcome the sufferings resulting from the erroneous understandings of things and phenomena that result from fundamental ignorance. Not only can the sufferings be removed, but even the propensity for self-grasping ignorance and the imprints left by past ignorant actions can be removed. Thus, one can completely eliminate ignorance in the present, the imprints of it from the past, and the propensity toward ignorance in the future. Transcending all ignorance, one naturally becomes free of fear, and one abides in the final nirvana of a buddha, which is the resultant nirvana.

D4. The Fruit of the Realization of Emptiness

All the buddhas of the three times have awakened to supreme, perfect, and complete enlightenment by depending on the perfection of wisdom.

Here the term **three times** refers to all buddhas throughout the universe. Certainly in their own perception, there're no such

conception of time and space, and the state of buddhahood is beyond the confinement of time and space. This term used here is from the perspective of ordinary people's perception, in order to emphasize all buddhas.

The fruit of the realization of emptiness is the unsurpassable buddhahood. Without fear or obscurations, without the slightest concept about their meditative states, the buddhas of the past, present, and future apply these Prajnaparamita practices and realize perfect enlightenment. Not only ordinary living beings and bodhisattvas need to solely rely on Prajnaparamita to achieve nirvana, all the buddhas of the ten directions and three times also manifested in this way to achieve the supreme, perfect, and complete enlightenment. Therefore, Prajnaparamita is the only way of becoming buddha, and each living being must follow this path and depend on Prajnaparamita to break free from samsara, and as a result, to attain the complete enlightenment and the ultimate liberation.

THE MANTRA WITH GREAT BLESSINGS

D5. The Mantra with Great Blessings

Therefore, one should know that the great mantra of the perfection of wisdom, the mantra of great knowledge, the supreme mantra, the mantra that is equal to the unequaled, is the mantra that pacifies all suffering, and it is true because it is not deceptive. The mantra of the perfection of wisdom was then stated:

tadyatha gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!

The perfection of wisdom itself, the Prajnaparamita, is here referred to as the “**great mantra**”. The meaning of mantra is to protect the mind or the mind stream. Thus, through attaining the perfection of wisdom, one’s mind will be completely protected against erroneous beliefs, against the mental afflictions that arise from such beliefs,

and against the suffering produced by the mental afflictions. It will lead to the ultimate destination of enlightenment.

The perfection of wisdom is called the “**mantra of great knowledge**” because thoroughly understanding its meaning eliminates the three poisons of craving, hatred, and ignorance. It transforms beginningless darkness into the state of great awareness.

It is called the “**supreme mantra**” because there is no greater method than the perfection of wisdom for saving one from the extremes of cyclic existence and the isolated peace of individual nirvana.

It is called the mantra “**equal to the unequalled**” because the Buddha’s enlightened state is unequalled. The state of buddhahood, or the state of equanimity, is known as the state without equal, and, through the deepest realization of this mantra, one attains a state equal to that state.

Finally, the perfection of wisdom is known as the mantra that “**pacifies all suffering**” because it calms all sufferings and also removes all propensities for future suffering.

The perfection of wisdom is the ultimate truth, so “**it is true**”. In the realm of the ultimate truth, there is no disparity between

appearance and reality, and thus this ultimate truth is “not deceptive”.

*The mantra of the perfection of wisdom was then stated:
tadyatha gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha!*

In Sanskrit, **tadyatha** literally means “it is thus” and prepares the way for what follows; **gate gate** means “go, go”; **paragate** means “go beyond”; **parasamgate** means “go totally beyond”; and **bodhi svaha** can be read as “be rooted in the ground of enlightenment”.

Thus, the entire mantra itself can be translated as “go, go, go beyond, go totally beyond, be rooted in the ground of enlightenment”. We can interpret this mantra metaphorically to read “go to the other shore”, which is to say, abandon this shore of samsara, unenlightened existence, which has been our home since beginningless time, and cross to the other shore of final nirvana and complete liberation.

Sometimes people may think that a mantra is just composed of certain types of syllables pronounced by human beings, and through chanting this mantra, the corresponding deity will come to offer help through his miraculous power. Actually this is not the proper view on mantra. Ultimately speaking, a mantra has no difference with its deity, or in other words, a mantra is exactly the manifestation of the deity. For example, when we chant *om mani padme hum*,

this mantra is exactly the manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, and they share the same entity.

ENCOURAGE TO LEARN AND PRACTICE PRAJNAPARAMITA

D6. Encourage to Learn and Practice Prajnaparamita

Shariputra, a bodhisattva, a great being, should train in the profound perfection of wisdom in this way.”

In Avalokiteshvara’s final statement, he offers encouragement to Shariputra, as well as to all the followers of this sutra. All bodhisattvas wishing to attain the full enlightenment must practice according to the profound transcendent wisdom, which breaks down all conceptual thoughts and ego-clinging in the ground of samsara and nirvana.

It is quite essential that each of us who wish to achieve enlightenment must engage in the practice of the Prajnaparamita. As taught by the great bodhisattva Maitreya, there are three types of root causes for attaining the path of seeing, or becoming a bodhisattva

who arrives the first bhumi. They are: 1) giving the teaching of the Prajnaparamita to others; 2) helping others to achieve the realization of the Prajnaparamita; 3) engaging in the meditation practice of the Prajnaparamita. All of these three root causes will generate incredible merit and lead practitioners to achieve the realization of the Prajnaparamita.

DISPEL DOUBT THROUGH THE BUDDHA'S AFFIRMATION

B2. Dispel Doubt through the Buddha's Affirmation

At that time, the Exalted One emerged from that concentration and said to Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva, the great being: "Well done, well done, son of noble qualities, it is just so; it should be just so. The perfection of wisdom should be practiced just as you said. The tathagatas will also rejoice in this."

The Buddha, arising from his samadhi, expresses his own appreciation for the flawless efforts of Avalokiteshvara and Shariputra. Up to this point, the Buddha has been deeply immersed in meditative absorption on the apprehension of the profound. During his meditation, the Buddha inspires Avalokiteshvara and Shariputra to engage in the foregoing dialogue. When their dialogue is concluded, the Buddha commends and affirms Avalokiteshvara's

expression. Here the Buddha reveals that he was both aware of and participating in all the aspects of their dialogue. At the Buddha's level, there is no distinction between meditative and post-meditative states. This affirmation indicates that Buddha's meditative absorption is in fact a fusion of both deep meditative concentration on emptiness—ultimate truth, and full awareness of the world of phenomena continually unfolding—relative truth.

So why does the Buddha need to affirm this dialogue? According to some commentaries, there are three reasons. The first one is to dispel the doubt of Shariputra, because he may wonder if he brought up a proper question; the second one is to dispel the doubt of Avalokiteshvara, because he may wonder if he answered the question in a proper way; and the third one is to dispel the doubts of the audience, because they may also wonder if the dialogue between Avalokiteshvara and Shariputra is a proper teaching on the Prajnaparamita. With the Buddha's affirmation in the end of the sutra, all of these doubts are completely dispelled, and the audience understand that this dialogue really has no difference with the teaching given by the Buddha himself.

The tathagatas will also rejoice in this.

The Buddha also offers the praise and encouragement of all buddhas of the three times and ten directions for all those endeavoring to practice the Prajnaparamita.



PRAISE AND REJOICE

PRAISE AND REJOICE

A3. Praise and Rejoice

Then, having the Buddha spoken these words, the venerable Shariputra and the bodhisattva, the great being, the noble Avalokiteshvara, with all beings of the world including gods, humans, asuras and gandharvas, heard the Buddha's discourse with great joy, received it with conviction, and promised to engage in practice.

In the end it is universal rejoicing in the Buddha's profound teaching. As we can see, within the assembly, there are gods, humans, asuras, gandharvas and numerous living beings in the world. This essential teaching benefits all beings without exception and all beings are considered equal by the Buddha. It is because all beings equally possess buddha nature, a precious treasure as yet undiscovered, which they can finally recognize by cultivating wisdom and compassion on the path. This is cause for rejoicing.

The last sentence, **“received it with conviction, and promised to engage in practice”**, shows us the right path to follow the teaching. First, we need to receive the teaching through listening and reflecting, during which stage we should be able to dispel all our ignorance, wrong views and doubts regarding the teaching and develop sincere conviction to the teaching. Second, based on such conviction, we need to put this teaching into practice through meditation and eventually realize the teaching on our own, which is the ultimate goal of the path.

Dedication

May the merit resulting from this piece of work contribute in the greatest possible measure to the long life of all great masters, to the flourishing of the Buddha Dharma, and to the welfare of all sentient beings.

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